

**DEVONSHIRE
CREAM**

A Comedy

EDEN PHILLPOTTS

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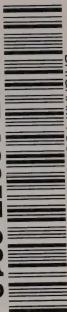
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1925



DEVONSHIRE CREAM



DUCKWORTH

15, BEDFORD SQUARE, LONDON, W.C.

PLAYS BY

EDEN PHILLPOTTS

THE SECRET WOMAN

THE SHADOW

THE MOTHER

CURTAIN RAISERS

ST GEORGE AND THE DRAGONS

THE FARMER'S WIFE

DEVONSHIRE CREAM

DEVONSHIRE CREAM

DEVONSHIRE CREAM

A COMEDY IN THREE ACTS

BY

EDEN PHILLPOTTS

"The cream of day's the morning glory ;
The cream of conquest is the strife ;
Hope is the cream of human story,
And love, dear love, the cream of life."
Old Song.



DUCKWORTH

3 HENRIETTA STREET, LONDON, W.C.

DEVONSHIRE CREAM

A COMEDY IN THREE ACTS

BY

EDEN PHILLIPS

First Published 1925

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by Turnbull & Spears, Edinburgh*

UPB

TO THE MEMORY

OF

ALBERT E. DRINKWATER

MY DEAR FRIEND, AT WHOSE WISH

THIS LITTLE RUSTIC VARIANT

OF THE OLD STORY

WAS WRITTEN

CHARACTERS

ELIAS WIDECOMBE	.	.	Of Coombe Farm, Dartmoor
AMY WIDECOMBE	.	.	His wife
BETH WIDECOMBE	.	.	His daughter
WILLIAM BLEE	.	.	His head-man
GREGORY SWEET	.	.	His cow-man
JENNY SWEET	.	.	His dairy-maid
JOSEPH MUNDAY	.	.	A very old labourer
ROBERT BLANCHARD	.	.	Of Twelve Trees Farm

SCENE. The Great Barn at Coombe Farm.

ACT I. Morning.

ACT II. Afternoon.

ACT III. Night.

CAST OF THE FIRST PRODUCTION,
 UNDER BARRY V. JACKSON'S
 MANAGEMENT, AT THE REPER-
 TORY THEATRE, BIRMINGHAM,
 ON SATURDAY, DECEMBER
 20TH, 1924

ELIAS WIDECOMBE . . .	Frank Moore
AMY WIDECOMBE . . .	Marjorie Gabain
BETH WIDECOMBE . . .	Frances Clare
WILLIAM BLEE . . .	Stringer Davis
GREGORY SWEET . . .	George Howe
JENNY SWEET . . .	Margaret Gaskin
JOSEPH MUNDAY . . .	Paget Hunter
ROBERT BLANCHARD . . .	Edgar Norfolk

Produced by H. K. AYLIFF.

Scenery and costumes designed by PAUL SHELIVING.

ACT I

SCENE.—*The great barn at Coombe Farm. A building complete in itself and situated fifty yards from the dwelling-house. The main doors face south, and when open reveal the farm-yard and the Moor beyond. In eastern wall, twelve feet from ground, is a window of lancet shape, five feet high. It is not glazed but has a bent iron bar down the middle. On one side of the bar is ample room for a man to enter. In the west wall of the barn is an entrance by an ordinary-sized door, while at the rear are the big main doors, which do not swing open, but run back on wheels. The barn walls are rosy-washed and timbered, and the waggon roof is of old, dark oak. The barn is being decorated for the silver wedding of ELIAS and AMY WIDECOMBE, and the decorations approach completion. There are strings of flags hanging aloft, and some wreaths of laurel and yew are disposed round the walls. To right is a trestle table, on which festoons of foliage lie. Near the table are branches of laurel and other evergreens. There are a few kitchen chairs beside the trestle table, and on the left of stage there stands a corn-bin with flat top that makes a seat. The big doors are bolted with a heavy*

padlock having a key in it. The barn is dark save for a shaft of morning light of a rosy quality that falls from the eastern window and makes a radiant pattern on the floor in the velvety gloom. The corn-bin, placed against left hand wall, stands in the midst of this light.

[After the Curtain has risen, ROBERT BLANCHARD appears aloft at the window. He holds the bar. Then he takes a length of rope from his pocket, throws it round the bar and swings down to the floor of the barn by it. He leaves the rope hanging from the bar. He listens a moment, then goes to the great main door of the barn, unlocks it, and pushes back one side of door a few feet, revealing a morning glimpse of the farm-yard and the Dartmoor hills beyond. The hills are distinctive and show the weathered peaks of a granite-crowned hill. ROBERT goes out stealthily and stands in the farm-yard for a moment. He sees BETH WIDECOMBE approaching and re-enters the barn. A moment later BETH appears, looking behind her to see that she is not observed, and then slips into barn, whereupon ROBERT shuts the door behind her.]

ROBERT. *[Shutting the door.]* There you be ! For all the world like a bird popping into her nest, when she thinks no one is looking !

BETH. And like a frightened bird I feel. [*Shakes hands.*] But you, Bob—how the mischief did you get in ?

ROBERT. [*Points to the window.*] That's where I got in, and that's where I'll get out.

BETH. How lovely, but how dangerous !

ROBERT. Life's bound to be dangerous for the young—with such a lot of middle-aged fools about. 'Tis them that make the world a parlous place.

BETH. Perhaps everything that's worth while is dangerous. You're running an awful risk. It must be the last time, Bob.

ROBERT. Why, it's only the first !

BETH. First and last then ; but the last time of anything is always rather sad, isn't it ?

ROBERT. Not always. Last time you go to a dentist isn't. I'm cruel bothered, Beth, and you don't make it easier neither. Your father, I mean. Be he going against us Blanchard folk for ever more ? What's the sense of hating old dead men ?

BETH. Or young live ones ? I can't see nothing much to hate about you myself.

ROBERT. Just because poor Uncle Andrew was his enemy, must I——

BETH. It goes back ever so far beyond your Uncle Andrew. Father says that Blanchards were always enemies to Widecombes—ages before you, or I, were born.

ROBERT. I know—I've heard the silly story often enough. According to Mr Widecombe,

Blanchards have queered the pitch of your people for generations. But his folk gave quite as good as they got, so Uncle Andrew always said. Why can't your father let the past bury the past?

BETH. It's a bee in his bonnet, I reckon.

ROBERT. He ought to keep his bees to himself then, and not let 'em sting other people.

BETH. He says no good can come out of the North, and no good to a Widecombe from a Blanchard.

ROBERT. Then let a Widecombe bring good to a Blanchard, and kill the strife that way.

BETH. That's a fine idea.

ROBERT. Not that your father will cook my goose. I'm not frightened of him. Elias Widecombe can't be so very bad with such a daughter as you. But there's another.

BETH. A real enemy, Bob? Never!

ROBERT. He don't know he's my enemy yet; but he jolly soon will.

BETH. Whoever can it be?

ROBERT. Charles Pardoe is his beastly name.

BETH. The lawyer?

ROBERT. Yes—him.

BETH. Why, Charlie's coming to the party to-night.

ROBERT. I know he is—and I know I ain't; and that's contrary to nature, I call it. He was in the bar of the "Green Man" yesterday afternoon opening his mouth as wide as usual.

BETH. Well, he's got beautiful teeth.

ROBERT. So's a rat-trap. It weren't his teeth,

but his tongue I quarrel with. A fool here and there chaffed him about——

BETH. Who, Bob?

ROBERT. You know who mighty well—or if you don't, your father does.

BETH. A thought too soon I should think.

ROBERT. And so should I. But Master Charlie didn't. There was a dozen in the bar, and he smiled all over his face when Neddy Tutt played "See the Conquering Hero Comes" on his concertina.

BETH. Even a lawyer can count his chickens afore they're hatched seemingly.

ROBERT. His chickens be damned! He was counting other people's chickens. No doubt he thinks he's only got to drop the handkerchief—vain fool. And he will to-night. Mark my words, he'll offer for you at the party.

BETH. [*Considers.*] Fancy that now!

ROBERT. I don't fancy it at all, and what's more, I won't have it.

BETH. I wouldn't say it was any business of yours though, Bob.

ROBERT. Depends how I'm feeling when I climb back out of that winder.

BETH. You'd best leave Charlie to me. Just think—father's and mother's silver wedding day! They've been married for twenty-five years—a longful time.

ROBERT. To us—not to them. Years slip away pretty quick if you'm happy. A proper bit of fun

you're going to have, so Billy Blee tells me, and a rare rally of neighbours, and dancing and brave victuals and fine drinking, and everybody invited for ten miles round—from Nun's Cross and Badger's Holt, from Cherrybrook and Watermeet, from Vixen Tor and Dousland Barns—everybody but me. 'Tis a shame I ban't coming.

BETH. I dursn't beg for it; I dursn't, Bob. If father knew we was friends even——

ROBERT. "Friends"—you and me? A long sight more than friends o' my side, Beth.

BETH. I yearned to ask, but I do believe it would ruin dad's life if he thought I'd ever looked at you.

ROBERT. There'll be a rare old row, of course, and the house out o' windows; but it's got to come, young Bethlet.

BETH. He'd have the law of 'e if he could pick a quarrel.

ROBERT. Put Charlie Pardoe on me I dare say.

BETH. He thinks the world of Charlie.

ROBERT. Then he thinks the same as Charlie do of himself—puffed-up toad. The question is what do you think of him?

BETH. Why should I think of him?

ROBERT. For a very good reason. He'll ax you to marry him afore this day's out; and he's running round already telling the people you mean to say "yes."

BETH. What else did he tell them, Bob?

ROBERT. No matter. I ban't going to fight the man behind his back. I only mention what he

told everybody in a full bar; and he'd had his drop of whisky too; and that's why Neddy Tutt played "The Conquering Hero." And if I thought Pardoe was going to conquer——

BETH. He's got a nice pair of blue eyes.

ROBERT. Yes, he has. So's a jackdaw. Lawyers and jackdaws be birds of a feather come to think of it.

BETH. You don't care about Charlie, I'm fearing.

ROBERT. Do you? That's the point.

BETH. Why shouldn't I like him if father does?

ROBERT. If you're only going to like where your father does, it's "good-bye" to me for one. Elias Widecombe is a very fine man, as we all know, but he don't understand more about human nature than a tadpole in a pond. He trusts the wrong uns. His heart be large and his wits be small. And 'tis people like him—with hearts of gold and brains of putty—that make half the trouble in the world.

BETH. You shan't say father's wits be weak, Robert.

ROBERT. I do, Beth—else how would he swear by such a hookem-snivey chap as Pardoe? Charlie's a slippery, shiftiy dodger, I tell you; and under all his smooth words and pretty smiles and kind promises, he's as sharp as a needle and hard as flint.

BETH. It's so easy to kindiddle father. Anybody can get round him.

ROBERT. They can if they ban't straight. Master Charlie's as crooked as a sickle, and your father

don't see it. But leave them. Time be passing, and I didn't come to waste it. Oh, Beth, you know very well what I want to say. I shan't say it half so pretty as what Charlie will to-night—but I'll say it first anyway. Yet now 'tis come—how the hell shall I say it? My words be gone, Bethlet.

BETH. Charlie could teach you to use pretty words anyway.

ROBERT. And I could teach him to do honest deeds.

BETH. You're pleased with yourself this morning.

ROBERT. Not if you ain't. I never looked a poorer thing to myself than since I fell in love with you, Beth.

BETH. Fell in love! Then Charlie's got a rival!

ROBERT. Sink Charlie! I don't want no more Charlie. There's only one thing for me; and you well know what it is. Tell me now—do 'e ever catch yourself with your thoughts running on me by good chance?

BETH. Might catch myself with my thoughts running away from you, perhaps.

ROBERT. Even that's hopeful. But you don't hate me—you said so.

BETH. I don't hate anybody. There's a lot of nice people in the world.

ROBERT. Pitch here on the corn-bin—just for five minutes. I must say it now or never. Sit here close—close. Just this once. I won't ax you again. You can jump up and fly away home, like a ladybird, if I don't pleasure 'e.

BETH. You sit here then and I'll sit here—in the sunshine.

ROBERT. 'Tis always sunshine where you are—and nowhere else nowadays.

[She sits, not too near him, on the corn-bin in the warm light flung from the eastern window.]

BETH. Mother says we make our own sunshine.

ROBERT. We can't if our neighbours will cloud it. Have you ever thought what a jolly fine world this would be if it weren't for the people in it?

BETH. There's some we shouldn't miss, I dare say.

ROBERT. Your mother's right. I want to make my own sunshine.

BETH. More like you'll make a proper, huge storm for yourself—and me too. 'Tis a wonderful, dangerous adventure, Robert.

ROBERT. All you think about is the danger.

BETH. I love danger—same as you do. Life was that peaceful afore you stopped me in Ladywell Lane six months ago, and made me talk to you and look in your face. And I shivered to think I'd spoke to a Blanchard.

ROBERT. If I've made you restless, that's a good sign, Beth. Nobody's worth much unless they be restless.

BETH. You've made me restless all right, Bob.

ROBERT. You wouldn't go back however?

BETH. You can't go back. There's only one way anybody can go, and that's forward.

ROBERT. And that's where I want to go. [*He gets nearer to her.*] Now list to me. And yet words are poor items against deeds—eh, Beth?

BETH. A great one for deeds you are. Deeds be best most times. I like brave deeds.

ROBERT. Think twice, however, afore you say that.

BETH. Why? You'd never do a naughty deed.

ROBERT. With you quotted up so close alongside me, I'm past words—long past 'em. The light in your eyes be like diamonds and your mouth's so lovely as a red rose. I can't stand it, I can't! Here! Come in my arms, for the love of God!

BETH. Robert!

ROBERT. Deeds I tell e'! That's all I want in this world or the next—just you in my arms for evermore.

BETH. If I come, shall I get out again? Promise——

ROBERT. Don't haggle, don't haggle! Come!

[*He takes her in his arms.*]

BETH. You don't give me time to haggle, Bob. This, this—oh—ought us to sit like this?

ROBERT. How should us sit? It's love I tell you—love—life—food—air—heaven—everything!

BETH. I've never been so close to anybody afore—but mother. Is it proper, Bob?

ROBERT. Don't chatter! Just let me draw it in.

[*Shuts his eyes.*]

BETH. I think I'd better go. 'Tis getting on for breakfast.

ROBERT. Breakfast! Ban't this better 'n breakfast? And don't you think you'll ever go. Never again. I could sit here on this corn-bin for a thousand years. I'll swear no lovers ever properly knew what love was before me and you. I see the poor couples mooning about, but 'tis all make-believe: they don't feel half as grand as us.

BETH. You really love me then—really and truly?

ROBERT. Look at me!

BETH. How wonderful—how beautifully dangerous, Bob! And I dare say you've been telling the people as I'm going to say "yes"?

ROBERT. Now don't you be too clever—else I'll kiss you—by God I will!

BETH. You wouldn't dare! [*He kisses her.*] Oh, Robert, what a peep-o'-day this has been!

ROBERT. "Peep-o'-day!" Peep of Heaven! Say "yes"—say "yes," and have done with it. You be far more than a holy angel would deserve for a wife—let alone Bob Blanchard. But say "yes"—say "yes," though I never shall believe it till I've got you wed and safe.

BETH. 'Twould be a tremendous happening. But you can't win through, Robert. You don't know father.

ROBERT. Say "yes" and I'll damn soon know him. The Lord help anybody who thinks to come between me and you! 'Tis beyond mortal power to do it now.

BETH. Mother's got no quarrel with you.

ROBERT. Then there's only Elias Widecombe, and I'll strike while the iron's hot. I'll go for him like a hungry tiger. It's his silver wedding day—a very good day for him to do a fellow man a good turn and bring peace to both sides.

BETH. Whatever will you dare to say to him?

ROBERT. I'll say this. I'll say, "Mr Widecombe, sir, your fine daughter, Beth, and me be cruel set on getting married and having a silver wedding day on our own. And so the sooner we hitch up the better chance of it.

BETH. Really and truly?

ROBERT. 'Tis life or death. A year ago, Beth, like a know-nought great fool, I laughed at the parent birds and beasts. "Bide free and you'll bide happy" I said to my silly self. But now I know better. Now I know the care of creatures for their little ones is a good thing. Love's a very fine trouble to come to a man, and he did ought to be proud of falling in love—not ashamed of it. I'd like to go and bawl out you've took me on the top of King Tor for everybody to hear.

BETH. I haven't took you yet, Robert—you can't exactly say I've took you.

ROBERT. Can't you? Well, here you are inside my arms anyway, and I swear you don't get out of 'em till I hear the word.

BETH. No, no, I must be heart-free a little longer.

ROBERT. To listen to Charlie—no doubt?

BETH. I love you to love me all the same. 'Tis a grand adventure—so far.

ROBERT. Women would sooner love was difficult than easy seemingly; men like it easy, I reckon. I don't want no grand adventure: I want you.

BETH. Hark! They're stirring!

[*Muffled voices of BILLY BLEE and GREGORY SWEET.*

ROBERT. Good Lord! I'd forgot the time!

[*Liberates BETH. They leap to the ground.*

BETH. The danger's begun!

ROBERT. [*Opening the big door eighteen inches.*] Quick, then, for dear life! Poor speed we should have if the governor caught us here!

[*BETH hastens out.*

[*ROBERT shuts and locks big door. Then he leaps up to window with aid of rope, slips through it and just vanishes as BILLY BLEE and GREGORY SWEET emerge through small door on the right. His disappearance and their entry are simultaneous. They unlock and throw wide open the big double doors.*

GREGORY. Will master let me sing my fine new song, or won't he, Billy?

BILLY. I hope not. I hope master won't let you sing at all. I hate your singing, Greg. 'Tis like a lamb that have lost its mother.

GREGORY. You ain't got no music in you.

BILLY. Master will decide. I dare say he'll call on you for a tune out of the kindness of his heart

when the feast be over and the folks too full to care what happens. Nobody born could stand your singing on an empty stomach.

GREGORY. Lawyer Pardoe praised my voice last night at the "Green Man."

BILLY. Yes—he'll praise anything that comes from Coombe Farm just now. He's got his axe to grind. As for me, I'd sooner hear a pig being killed any day than you singing a song. No natural gift, Gregory. Now us have got to see to the triumphant arch. There's to be no work to-day after we've milked the cows.

GREGORY. The day of days be come sure enough ! And not a speck on the sky.

BILLY. Too fair to last, I reckon. You fetch more green stuff first thing after breakfast, and Joe will help you when he comes.

GREGORY. Here's master. Shall I ax about my song ?

BILLY. Never ax him for nought afore he's had his breakfast if you don't want "no" for an answer.

[Exit GREGORY.

[He crosses again at back a few minutes later with milking pails.

[ELIAS WIDECOMBE *has entered by the small door. BILLY is pulling up a flight of flags.*

BILLY. Many happy returns of the great day, master.

ELIAS. Nay, nay. One silver wedding is all that mortal man can hope for, Billy.

BILLY. Brave weather for it anyhow. A real thirsty day be promised, thank God!

ELIAS. A quarter of a century along with one woman—a rare performance, Billy.

BILLY. So it is then—and you never a particular patient man neither.

ELIAS. A clever feat for certain.

BILLY. Yes—wonderful clever—on the part of missis.

ELIAS. The woman as can keep a man close enough to be faithful for five-and-twenty years is a bit out of the common, Billy.

BILLY. So rare as a mushroom in May, I reckon.

ELIAS. How long was you married?

BILLY. We struggled on for ten full year, and I prayed the Lord, night and day, to take one of us. I'd got to such a pass I didn't care which went. Then in His mercy He fetched Eliza.

ELIAS. You'll keep your silver wedding in the Better Land, Billy Blee.

BILLY. No, no! Don't you say that. I won't have it. No marrying, nor giving in marriage there; and I shall make that mighty clear to my old partner the first minute I set foot in the place.

ELIAS. No use your old woman wanting to hook on again?

BILLY. Not a chance; there's no hooking on up there. [*Points aloft.*] I ban't going to share my eternal mansion with Eliza Blee, nor yet any other female.

ELIAS. Well, we can't all have my luck. The

garlands are up I see. The old barn never looked so fine afore, I reckon.

BILLY. A rare rally of neighbours coming they tell me.

ELIAS. Everybody—every mother's son of 'em. Not one refusal. Half a hundred I guess will sit down to supper. By the same token, have the barrel of beer come?

BILLY. It come yesterday, when you was down looking at "Three Barrow Crofts."

ELIAS. The Mortimores—both families—fathers, mothers, and daughters. The Fords and the Smerdons, the Sweetlands and the Dunnybrigs and Charlie Pardoe. He'll give us one or two of his famous ballets I shouldn't wonder. Sings like a grey bird; and a dancer too. Then there's the Whites and the Worths—

BILLY. But don't let Jane White sit along with them Worth women. They be all related, and you know what it is with female relations: they'll often hate each other in secret and quarrel like cats for all their company speeches. Thicky Jane White have got a tongue like a viper. She'll come in her dandy-go-russet gown and best bonnet, looking as though butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, and bite everybody's head off.

ELIAS. Trust the missis to sort them out. She knows Jane White.

BILLY. Put her alongside that deaf woman, Ann Masters. That's safest. Ann Masters will only eat and drink. She's one of they greedy females—

can't see a worm without wishing she was a bird.

ELIAS. But the Halfyards from Merrypit won't come now.

BILLY. No, not with Jonathan Halfyard in his coffin and the burying o' Monday.

ELIAS. I'm sorry for Jonathan's wife and childer, yet not for myself. 'Tis an ill wind——

BILLY. Yes. It means the "Three Barrow Crofts" for us at last.

ELIAS. It do; and Lord He knows we've waited patient enough for them. The farm's to be sold, and a year ago, when Jonathan looked like going home and Charlie'd been to make his will, Pardoe promised me first refusal of the Crofts when they came into market. All a thousand pounds they were worth, if not more, but the money's waiting.

BILLY. A very pretty stretch of ground as I've always said. Nice tilth and good for wondrous surprises in your hands. But what if Robert Blanchard wants it and bids for it?

ELIAS. Blanchard! He wouldn't dare, the dog.

BILLY. He'd dare anything. And why not? 'Tis a free country. 'Tis worth quite as much to him at "Twelve Trees" as to us at Coombe. 'Twould finish off his ewe lease very clever.

ELIAS. Don't you tell that stuff, Billy, for I don't want to show no temper to-day. Blanchard! Haven't me and mine stood enough from his family all our lives? The reptiles have bit us for generations.

BILLY. But Widecombes bit back pretty sharp also.

ELIAS. Shut your mouth. I won't hear nothing on that subject. I've got the refusal and the lawyer's word, and that's enough. And—and I hope Robert Blanchard will want it. I hope he's counting on it. 'Tis my turn to win a trick in that game, and I'll be glad to best the rip.

BILLY. [*Who has been getting on with the decorations while he talks.*] I could wish you didn't hate the young chap quite so bad. A honest and straight man and very well thought of. Pays his bills and saves money. What more can he do? Nobody have ever catched him in anything particular bad to my knowledge. Why, he's even going to give that rascal, Jacko Caunter, another chance. Few would have done that after he'd found Jacko at his tricks again.

ELIAS. He's a Blanchard, and good or bad, no Blanchard was ever known to be straight where Widecombes are concerned. So let him be. I want no evil thoughts in my mind to-day. As for "Three Barrows," my plans are made a'ready.

BILLY. Trust you to look ahead. You've got your plans made for Kingdom Come, I'll warrant.

ELIAS. So us all did ought to have.

BILLY. Be Bob axed to the party? He's a lonely blade.

ELIAS. [*Amazed.*] A Blanchard axed to my party! What the mischief will you say next, William Blee? I didn't know as you'd got bats in the belfry.

BILLY. Well—everybody else of any account be coming ; so I thought——

ELIAS. Don't think then. Spare yourself. Your brain ban't made to think. Curse the man ! Have he bewitched you ? Ax a Blanchard to my silver wedding ! I'd sooner ax the devil !

BILLY. Well, well, no offence, master. 'Tis your party, and you've the right to choose the men and women. Crowder Bassett have got his fiddle ready for the dancing, and Uncle Pomeroy be bringing his clarionet. I shouldn't have thought as he had enough breath for it—him nearer eighty than seventy by all accounts, but he makes up with cleverness what he lacketh in wind—a great musicker be Uncle Pomeroy.

ELIAS. I say “Look after the drinking and the dancing will look after itself.” Tap the new barrel as soon as you can.

BILLY. It shall be done. But keep your eye on the spirits. There's some might forget their manners with such a lot of free drinks flowing ; and after “treble X” you've got to be careful how you let down whisky and gin. So I always find. And Lawyer Pardoe's coming, you say ?

ELIAS. Certainly he is. Puts up at the “Green Man” for the night. He'll lift us all to a high level, along of his mixing with the quality.

BILLY. There's bad quality as well as good. And lawyers' quality be mostly bad.

ELIAS. You never liked lawyers.

BILLY. Not a chance. They pick the plums out

of too many puddings. Too much of everybody's money sticks on their paws. They grab a darn sight more than their share in my opinion. 'Tis time the rest of us looked into their dark ways.

ELIAS. We can't get on without 'em, however.

BILLY. They take mighty good care we shan't get the chance to try. You won't catch them striking. They cling closer to us than our clothes. Us can't live nor yet die without 'em, and they make the laws for their own profit, not ours.

Enter BETH WIDECOMBE and JENNY SWEET.

JENNY has a big basket and is going to the poultry house for eggs. BETH carries flags and other decorations for barn. BILLY takes a sack and half fills it with grain from the corn-bin.

JENNY. Marnin', master. Wish you joy, I'm sure.

ELIAS. And thank you, Jenny.

JENNY. I hope the fowls have laid proper this marnin', for we shall want a powerful lot of eggs.

ELIAS. If clucking means eggs, they have.

BILLY. Clucking be just so likely to mean foxes. I heard one barking in the night—bowldacious rascal!

[Exeunt BILLY and JENNY to farm-yard.]

ELIAS. Morning, my pretty gal!

BETH. Many happy returns of your wedding day, dear dad! *[Kisses him.]*

ELIAS. 'Tis a great wonder, Beth. Five-and-twenty year; and though it finds me so grey as a badger, I be lively as a cricket at heart still.

BETH. A long road to look back upon.

ELIAS. So it is then. And funny travelling sometimes. But here I am still, and mother too. The Lord looks after His own, Beth. A lot to do to the barn yet; but I'll wager you was up and stirring with the sun this morning.

BETH. Yes—I've been a bit busy already, dear father.

ELIAS. Trust you for that. No child of mine would waste her time. Have us got enough cloam? I'm fearing the plates and dishes will run out.

BETH. There's plenty enough. [*Hangs up flowers.*]

ELIAS. Has old Captain Daniel sent the bunting he promised to lend me?

BETH. Yes, all the lovely flags came last night.

ELIAS. [*Helping.*] A quarter of a century I've run in double harness; and 'mazing steady too. A very understanding pair me and your mother, Beth. If every married couple had got our thinking parts, what a world it would be!

BETH. It would indeed.

ELIAS. Yes, faith! And if you have your mother's patience and your father's common-sense you needn't fear your future neither, Beth. And nowadays, when they tell marriage be getting out of date, with such like horrors and inventions of the devil, me and mother are a pretty good example for the rising generation.

BETH. Did the course of true love run smooth with you, father, before you wed ?

ELIAS. [*Considering.*] Why d'you ax that ?

BETH. Because 'tis said it never do ; and half the fun be the fight that goes before the victory.

ELIAS. Well, there's difficulties may rise up, I grant ; but if a man properly loves a women, love quickens his wits and he wins in the long run.

BETH. Ah !

ELIAS. Not as there's like to be much trouble for you, I reckon. Marriage be the art to give and take, though nowadays it seems to be the art of give nought and take all—a game—a game of grab, and true love the last thing thought upon.

BETH. Marriage is a sacrament—not a game.

ELIAS. So it did ought to be no doubt. In my young days a lot of marriages were made in Heaven ; but 'tis the other place looks after most of 'em now. You're wife-old at any rate, and the man that wins you will be up against some pretty stiff cross-questioning, I promise him. Jonnick he must be, and straight as a die, with good principles and a proper understanding of what he owes to my daughter and her family. No gallyvanter—nothing like that. A Christian man with a good constitution and his life insured, and a tidy balance at the bank.

BETH. My ! He'll have to be a wonder !

ELIAS. Perhaps I know such a man and perhaps I do not. Have you ever thought upon a certain

chap with blue eyes and curly hair as don't live a hundred miles from Plymouth?

BETH. You mean——

ELIAS. Ha—ha! You know who I mean! There's the flickets rose-red in your cheeks a'ready! Well, well—youth will be youth. Master Charlie's the most rising lawyer in the Three Towns—so a little bird tells me.

BETH. Don't talk nonsense, father.

ELIAS. No—no. No man ever hears nonsense from me—nor yet no woman. Give him time—give him time. We all know the law's delays. A dollop of money too, I hear. Not everything, but very well in its proper place. He shan't sit on the fence too long though—eh? You ban't the sort to go begging. Me and mother knows only too well what must hap soon.

BETH. No, you don't, father. I don't quite know myself yet.

ELIAS. You know well enough! You can't hood-wink your father.

*Enter AMY WIDECOMBE with more decorations
—some Chinese lanterns.*

BETH. Many, many happy returns of your wedding day, dear mother. [*Kisses her mother.*]

ELIAS. Here I've brought the roses in her cheeks, talking about another wedding day, that ain't going to be far off, I reckon.

AMY. When your man comes, Beth, may he be

such a man as mine, and may you have such content and happiness, such hope and love—aye, and such a good daughter too.

BETH. Darling mother !

ELIAS. She is a darling then. Quite right, Beth. Dang-my-old-wig ! Do a woman stop being a darling because her hair's gone grey ? Once a darling, always a darling to her dying day. Patience alive she has been, with sense to spare for all that want it. And Lord knows most Dartmoor people do. A light to my path ever since we wed—the light of a rare, fine character. Yes, Beth, when I chose your mother, I showed a pretty good judgment, and if I could go back and choose once more, 'tis her and only her I'd take.

AMY. I know it, Elias. And I'm mighty proud too for winning such a husband.

BETH. You are pleased with yourselves !

ELIAS. And every right to be. And may you find yourself so well content on your silver wedding day, you pert miss !

BETH. I mast seek another so good and wise as you, father.

AMY. And you won't meet him on every black-berry bush, neither. Your father be a fashion of man that's growing rare, Beth.

ELIAS. You listen to your mother's sense—she knows.

AMY. Where will your silver wedding day find you, my pretty ?

BETH. I know where I hope it will.

AMY. Not on Dartymoor, I reckon.

ELIAS. Dartymoor! Not her. She'll soon turn her back upon poor old Dartymoor. She'll run when somebody whistles, and follow him to Jericho beyond Jordan if need be—the baggage.

BETH. Yes—I'd follow where he led—if it was to the end of the world.

ELIAS. He won't go no further than Plymouth, I hope. But if London——

[BETH and her MOTHER hang a festoon of laurel and paper flowers—

calls, London it must be. Great men all turn up in London soon or late. I was there myself once—for three days. A fussy place and not enough air to go round. And terrible little news moving. I didn't hear Dartymoor mentioned, nor yet see it in the newspapers all the time I was up there. A lot of business, no doubt, and a lot of darned unhappy-looking people doing it. All so white as a dog's tooth; and many of the poor souls looked hungry too. Why they stop there beats me—chuckle-headed zanies—while there's the West Country to come to and room for all.

BETH. I hope my man won't have no use for London.

ELIAS. Perhaps London will have a use for him. "My man," mark you! Did you hear that, mother?

*Enter to the door of barn, GREGORY
SWEET with milk-pails.*

AMY. There you are, Gregory. Then we'll think upon breakfast.

GREGORY. I was going to say—I was going to say——

ELIAS. Well, say it, my son.

GREGORY. I was going to say as I'd be cruel pleased to give 'e a song after supper. 'Twould be a good *advertisement* for me.

ELIAS. Your singing be such a melancholy row, Gregory.

GREGORY. Not when I've had a pint, master. I get so gay as a bird after beer.

BETH. You've only got one song, Greg—about the fly in the turnips.

GREGORY. No, miss. I've larned another, 'tis called "Who'll win the Farmer's Darter?"

ELIAS. Ha—ha—you crafty scamp! But perhaps we know a'ready—eh, Beth?

[Exit ELIAS to house.]

GREGORY. I do humbly pray as you'll put in a word for me, missis. *[To BETH.]* 'Tis a song for the occasion, miss, and high class. *[He sings slyly, quietly.]*

"Sez I, 'Give us a kiss.' 'Go along,' sez she,

But she did. They never say 'no' to me."

AMY. We'll see, we'll see, Gregory. There's such a lot of things going to happen after supper.

GREGORY. 'Twas a bold highwayman won the farmer's darter; but she couldn't take the man, because he was caught and hanged! A beautiful song, miss.

[Exit GREGORY singing.]

BETH. Dear dad—if he'd only listen sometimes and not talk so much.

AMY. He's happy as a boy this morning. Woke happy—and as he wakes, so he always goes on. When he wakes glumpy—well, you know. But things be going right; and when things be right, there's no man rejoices more than your father. He'll be like David dancing afore the Ark to-day. And when he's happy, he'll have everybody else happy, or know the reason why.

BETH. You don't dare to be miserable when father's happy. 'Tis a fearful crime in his eyes.

AMY. He likes his cup of happiness to brim over for all to share. And when he's vexed, the dear man takes good care his cup of trouble runs over too. Then he makes everybody ache a bit—even to the hoss he's riding. But human nature don't change. 'Tis his forcible character, Beth. He do feel things so keen. But us women can always get on with a man of character. 'Tis the men with no character break our hearts, because you can't rely on 'em.

BETH. I hope dad will always be so well satisfied as he is this morning.

[They handle another wreath, or put candles into the Chinese lanterns.]

'Twould be a sad grief, mother, if ever I came between him and his pleasure.

AMY. You—my pretty bud! You're little likely to do that.

BETH. I may—I may have to vex him sharply afore long. If he don't change, that is.

AMY. "Change"? There's no shadow of changing with your father. He's as steadfast as the hills and valleys. Beth—tell me—tell your mother, child. I don't want no cloud on the sky to-day—nor yet in your eyes. Ban't your happiness more to me than anything on earth? You didn't look none too pleased when your father rattled on about Lawyer Pardoe. What is it, Beth? Be the man holding off too long, or coming on too fast? I'm not clever, but love's got its own cleverness. I remember what I felt when I was a girl and father was making up his mind. Waiting is hard and men are wilful. They will do things their own way, even when they're in love; and their way ban't our way. They look ahead and often see things that frighten them. Nought frights us when we're in love.

BETH. That's true enough.

AMY. I'd dearly like to see you wed and cuddle my grandchilder, Beth. But he must be the right one. Is Mr Charlie the right one?

BETH. [*Shakes her head.*] True love didn't ought to run smooth. It would with Charlie Pardoe because—because—he's like a machine—all oil and polish.

AMY. I know what you mean. Strange you and me don't care about him if father does.

BETH. Dad thinks he can read people like a book, but he can't. Any bad man could fool father. He makes plenty of mistakes—and I reckon Mr Pardoe is one of them.

Enter JENNY with basket of eggs.

JENNY. "Speckly" have laid a proper whopper, miss. [*She holds up a large brown egg.*] Just like her cleverness—knowed the day for sartain.

AMY. Take it in and get Mary to poach it for Mr Widecombe's breakfast, Jenny. 'Twill be a very clever start for his day.

JENNY. So it will then. And—and do e' let brother Greg sing his song to the company. 'Twill break his heart if he be refused. [*Exit JENNY.*]

BETH. Charles Pardoe is a thought too sure of himself. He's downy. I wouldn't say but what he might be a bad man when he's out of sight of good ones.

AMY. He ain't bad, Beth. You see his name on all the charity lists along with the bettermost people. And he's so nice in his manners and ready with his promises.

BETH. Fine apple-blooth don't always turn into cider. A man's promises——

AMY. I grant you can't judge the inside from the out.

BETH. Sometimes you can though. There's some

men handsome all through—from their faces to their hearts. There's some so modest as maids, and so ignorant of their fine qualities, that it's a pleasure for a girl to tell them how good they are.

Enter BILLY with empty sack. He goes to the bin for more corn.

AMY. [To BETH.] My stars! Now we're hearing things. When a pretty girl gets patting a young man on the back, he'll very soon——

BETH. No, he won't—not the best. There are such men, mother.

AMY. Never did I hear you praise the men afore! You're not yourself this morning.

BETH. Yes I am. For the first time in my life I am myself, and I'm proud of myself too.

[JOSEPH MUNDAY comes into the yard and approaches. He carries a basket with four bottles.]

JOSEPH. Marnin', souls! Seeing me pass to work, Jerry Pitman at the "Green Man" bade me fetch along these here bottles—a free gift from him for the feast. 'Tis brown sherry wine, and he hopes as it will rejoice the master.

BILLY. Brown sherry wine, Joe!

[He takes the bottles from JOSEPH and examines them.]

AMY. How properly kind of Jerry.

JOSEPH. He is a kind man—a very Christian sort of a man I might say. Always the same. Yes, you can depend on Jerry. Certainly nobody

have ever seen him sober since he married his second; but then, again, nobody have ever seen him drunk, have they, William?

BILLY. Never. He holds the balance wonderful clever—always betwixt and between with Pitman.

AMY. His own enemy he is, Joe.

JOSEPH. No, ma'am. He ain't got no enemy but undying thirst, which be a gift from God in careful hands.

BILLY. You can tell what time of day it is by Jerry. Of a morning he breathes out cider with a touch of sloe gin, and in the afternoon he falls back on beer and a thimbleful of cherry brandy. Then, come night, 'tis all spirits till closing time, and the smell of 'em do clothe him like a garment.

JOSEPH. Yet a very honest man and made of charity. For my part, if I had to stand all day long with a beer engine in front of me and a barrel of whisky behind, Lord knows I should fall.

BILLY. So should I, so should I, Joe. And who can blame a publican for lifting his elbow a bit when the devil's always at it?

JOSEPH. But a most merciful fashion of man. I've seen him let a black beetle run by into his wife's parlour, because he said 'twas doing its Maker's will and he'd got no right to interfere.

BILLY. 'Tis God's business to make beetles no doubt; but 'tis ours to smash 'em. Lord send Jerry never sees nothing worse than a beetle. I'm always fearing he will.

AMY. You'd best to go and help Gregory with

the triumphant arch this morning, Joe. We ban't doing no more work than we must to-day.

JOSEPH. So I will then; and I pray the master be facing this tremendous affair in a hopeful spirit.

[Exit JOSEPH.]

BILLY. [*Smelling one of the bottles.*] It have always been the dream of my life to drink a full wine-glass of sherry wine.

BETH. Haven't you ever tasted it, Billy?

BILLY. Wish I may die if I have! I come within sight of it once—when my wife went home—and I bought a bottle for the funeral, because brown sherry wine be the right and proper drink at such times; but when her relations were gone, there wasn't a drop. They'd left nothing but the beautiful smell of it.

BETH. You shall have a full glass to-night, Billy.

BILLY. Then patience will be rewarded. I shan't forget, miss.

BETH. More shan't I, Billy.

[Exit BILLY with the four bottles—still smelling a cork.]

AMY. I've had uneasy thoughts. I've known you was mooning of late in the dimpsey light, and reckoned you weren't there to look at the stars, Beth. But I never put a name to the man.

BETH. Too good for him, he says I am. Too good for him! He's wanted me this longful time, mother, and I——

AMY. Not Bob Blanchard! Don't for dear life say 'tis him, Beth!

BETH. To think that such a wonder should only be called "Bob Blanchard"!

AMY. But if he is—then all's said. 'Twas madness on your part and you know it.

BETH. Why, mother? Did anybody ever say a bad word against him? He's honest and straight—and fine to look at too.

AMY. He's good as they go, I believe—honourable and steady. And that's all we elders have got the right to ask from any young man; and more than we generally get for that matter. Good as gold and handsome as a picture—I grant it. But he's a Blanchard and you're a Widecombe; and you know that as well as I do. You ain't going to tell me you've took him, Beth?

BETH. No, I haven't took him exactly, though you may say he's took me. But it weren't silly ghosts from the past that held my tongue. I ain't frightened of no ghosts, mother.

AMY. Let the ghosts lie all the same and don't rouse 'em. Drop it, once for all, if you love me and your father. If there's one thing on earth that never, never can be, it's that thing.

BETH. There's no "never can be" with true lovers, mother.

AMY. Don't you play with fire, and don't make no mistake about this. All the law and the prophets be against it. Fate's against it.

BETH. We make our own fate, mother.

AMY. Nonsense and stuff. Fate's like nature; you try to break her and she'll very soon break

you. The sins of the fathers are visited on the childer.

BETH. How if the childer scorn to bear 'em? Dead quarrels won't keep apart live lovers—not if I know Bob.

AMY. Your father's your fate—not Robert Blanchard. Please God he don't scent this. 'Twould spoil all and wreck our silver wedding.

BETH. Is it right, is it fair, mother, because half a century ago Robert's uncle——?

AMY. Don't ax no questions. Your good's mine and I want to make your happiness sure, Beth; but when it comes to father—me and him are one—one in all things.

BETH. Of course, mother, father's your fate all right—but not mine. You've been on his side for twenty-five years and will be for twenty-five more, I hope. And I've been on his side for twenty-three years myself. Don't you fret. Bob's as clever as he's good. Goodness don't go far for that matter if you ain't clever too. And most of the good men ain't clever. That's why they generally get left, no doubt.

AMY. Promise one thing: don't 'e run away from us, or do any rash, cruel deed like that. 'Twould ruin your home.

BETH. My home will be my home—not yours, mother. A bird out of the nest never hops back no more. We make our own homes.

AMY [*Staring at her.*] Oh, my God! And you but yesterday a dinky little maid picking primrosen!

BETH. I'll promise nought—nought more than this: to love you and dad faithful and true so long as I live.

AMY. There's two sides to everything, remember. And your father's got more against that race in the past—far more than you will ever know, or Bob Blanchard either.

BETH. What be the past to lovers?

AMY. Something that too often overgets the future, my dear.

BETH [*Starting. She has been looking into the farm-yard.*] Good Lord-a-mercy! Oh, mother! Here's Bob coming across the yard!

AMY. Coming here? Has he gone daft? What May-games be these? If master sees him there'll be blood let.

BETH. He don't care who sees him.

Enter ROBERT BLANCHARD.

Bob, you didn't ought to be here to-day.

ROBERT. Only a little minute. It's all right, Mrs Widecombe. The governor's off down the lane.

AMY. He'll be back to his breakfast afore you can look round; and if he sees you here—for the Lord's sake be off!

ROBERT. Right, ma'am, right! I'm safe for a wink anyhow. I did hope as you might ax me to the party, though no doubt I couldn't expect that. But a silver wedding be something out of

the common surely ; and friends did all ought to bring silver presents—eh ? And I'm a friend, Mrs Widcombe—I will be a friend.

AMY. This is moonshine, Blanchard.

ROBERT. [*Taking locket from his pocket.*] No, it isn't—it looks like it, but it's silver—hall-marked.

BETH. [*Taking locket.*] You've brought mother a gift !

ROBERT. And why not ?

BETH. Why, Jerry Pitman at the "Green Man" have just sent her one too. And four silver trinkums come for her by postman. And other presents promised.

ROBERT. 'Tis like that famous day at church when Parson Champernowne axed the people to bring gifts from their farms for the 'orspital. And he said, "I hope next Sunday that all the ladies will kindly lay their eggs in the font !"

AMY. [*Very anxious.*] For the love of the Lord be gone, boy.

ROBERT. 'Twas the same parson as kept a pack of hounds and often wore pink under his surplice 'twas said. And when Bishop Harry of Exeter ordered him to put down his pack and give up such wild ways, he answered back and told the lord Bishop that the hounds belonged to his wife, and he only took 'em for exercise ; but sometimes they'd rouse a fox, so he had to gallop after 'em to see the fox didn't hurt 'em.

AMY. Do go away. And take your present. I don't want no gifts from you. You must be crazy

not to know this can't be. Go, like a good chap. Yes, you are a good chap—and I never said you wasn't; but a Blanchard is a Blanchard, and life's life, and things are as they are. You're a fool, Robert, to come here this morning of all mornings. If master sees you, 'twill mean the day spoiled and trouble brewed to last till Christmas.

ROBERT. Life's life as you say, Mrs Widecombe; and love's love; and a silver wedding's a silver wedding; and I wish you and your master joy—whether he hates me or not.

AMY. Go—go—I be in a miz-maze of fear.

ROBERT. I'm off; but this—take it just for luck. [*He takes locket from BETH's hand.*] A little old silver locket and a silver chain. 'Twas among some odds and ends as belonged to my mother. And the locket's got your letter on it—just “A” and “Always faithful.”

AMY. You silly chap.

BETH. Take it, take it, mother! To pleasure Bob. To pleasure me.

ROBERT. I've polished it up till it might be flame new, though Lord knows how old really.

AMY. I'll take it then, if you'll only be gone this instant moment—and go round the linhey and keep your head down. And—and thank you.

ROBERT. I'm gone, ma'am. Good luck! [*Going to BETH.*] Do your mother know we'm—friends?

BETH. She do—and don't much like it. She's father's side.

ROBERT. She must like it. She's got to like it—everybody's got to like it—if you like it.

[Goes off quickly. AMY looks at locket.]

AMY. Is he safe through the gate? Oh, Beth, what would father say?

BETH. *[Taking locket.]* What can he say. Ain't it pretty, mother?

AMY. You keep it.

BETH. No, no—'tis your gift. "Always faithful." What better motto for you—or father?

[Gives locket to her mother.]

AMY. Some are faithful in hate as well as love. Good lovers can be good haters too.

BETH. I'll be as faithful as father.

Enter BILLY BLEE.

BILLY. *[Looking over his shoulder.]* Guy Fawkes and angels—what be Blanchard be doing here? Is his wits gone?

BETH. He's brought a silver wedding gift for mother. 'Tis time this silly nonsense between the families was dead and buried, Billy.

BILLY. More'n time, as I've said for twenty year. But as to being buried, it won't be buried so long as Elias Widecombe ain't. He's a very clever man, as we all know, but not clever enough to forgive the dead seemingly.

AMY. Master had his side, William.

BILLY. He had; but what's the sense of hating the tree because last year's plums gave you the

belly-ache? Bob Blanchard's sweet enough; and forgive and forget's a very good motto still.

ELIAS [*Off.*] On my ground! A Blanchard! A Blanchard put his blasted boots on my ground—God's light!

AMY. There! He's seen him! I knew he would!

BILLY. Us be in for a tantara now sure enough.

BETH. Remind father 'tis his silver wedding day.

Enter ELIAS very angry.

ELIAS. What man did I see going down along by the linhey?

BETH. Mr Blanchard—come in the way of kindness, father.

ELIAS. "The way of kindness," you sauce-box! A Blanchard come to a Widecombe in the way of kindness? Treacherous devils! How did he dare creep in here to my females behind my back?

AMY. [*Who has put locket and chain in her pocket.*] Your eyes be sharp as ever, Elias. Yes—it was Robert Blanchard—to wish us joy of our silver wedding. He didn't bide a minute and didn't reckon he was doing wrong.

ELIAS. No—Blanchards never reckon they be doing wrong—lawless wretches! The rest of the world have got to go straight, but Blanchards can act how they damn well please!

BETH. Nonsense, dad! Mayn't he wish you well, like all the rest of the world be going to? Surely

'tis a brave day to forget old grievances and make new friends.

ELIAS. Do I hear my darter talking? "Forget old grievances"! Have truck with a Blanchard—us? What trash be you made of, girl?

BETH. Good Widecombe all through, I hope, father. He came to give us joy, that's all. Why shouldn't a neighbour do that?

ELIAS. A "neighbour" you call him? A Blanchard neighbour with a Widecombe! Because he's next door, the rascal, do that make him a neighbour? Do the otter neighbour with the salmon, because they live in the same water? A neighbour for rogues—that's what every Blanchard is. The brazen impudence—to take my silver wedding day in his mouth and cross my threshold to do it! No Blanchard have been inside thicky gate for five-and-twenty year. And he comes—when my back is turned—and you let him breathe the same air with you and don't loose the dogs on him—crooked knave.

BETH. You've no right to call him a crooked knave, father.

ELIAS. Not call a Blanchard a knave? Lecture your father would you, you naughty baggage! Who did I meet yesterday night by the cattle trough? I met Jan Caunter the game-keeper, and he told me his daughter Molly and that rip Blanchard—there, I'll not dirt your ears with it. A low rogue I tell you—like all as ever came of his havage—bad blood—poisonous blood.

BILLY. There was a reason for Blanchard being along with Molly Caunter.

ELIAS. There's a reason for everything, you mumphead, and no call to look for reasons with a Blanchard. The reason for his being with a girl like her is clear enough. He's a lewd, low-minded young swine—not above picking up any trash in a petticoat.

BETH. That's a wicked thing to say, father, and I don't believe it.

ELIAS. And who the hell cares what you believe, you imp! Caunter believes it anyway, and he'll act according—same as I would.

AMY. Never was an ugly word spoken against Robert Blanchard, father.

ELIAS. Then it's time there was. Now just you give heed to me—the pack of you. Dang-my-old-wig! A nice come-along-of-it to hear you noodles. Us'll be done with this treason once for all. Answer one question. What's my strong point—me, Elias Widecombe?

BETH. You've got such a lot of strong points, father.

BILLY. Made of 'em—properly bristling with strong points you might say.

ELIAS. So I believe. And a good thing I am. And if I'd had any fore-token of this job, you'd have heard about 'em sooner. We want plain mouth-speech in this house, with a lot of slack-twisted ninnyhammers like you. There's one thing above all else belongs to me, and that's common-sense.

AMY. Who doubts it ?

BILLY. Common-sense ain't catching—worse luck.

ELIAS. No—or you wouldn't be such a pack o' fools ! The Blanchard race was always bad—bad to their boots—a rotten folk—and they've handed down their wickedness from father to son, from uncle to nephew.

BETH. But, dad——

ELIAS. Not a word. I won't have no "buts" from you, Beth. I won't have no "buts" from anybody. I ban't the sort of man to be butted. If a kestrel hangs over the hen-roost, what do I say ? Do I say, "Ah, there's a hawk as I haven't quarrelled with afore, so no doubt he's a gentleman and don't want my chickens." No, I get my gun and shoot him, because he's a hawk, and a varmint's a varmint. And a Blanchard's a Blanchard and always will be, till God A'mighty gets sick of 'em and wipes 'em off the earth.

BILLY. A bad man can have a good son by the mercy of Providence. 'Tis coming it a bit too strong to say Bob Blanchard's a wrong 'un because his uncle served you ill.

ELIAS. What do you know, you old lion-monkey ?

[BILLY is bald and clean-shaved, but he has a large, full fringe of red-grey hair under his chin and looks very like an old monkey.

You'd teach me how to behave ? Teach me ! Be off, and go to work and mend your manners. What the devil's in the air this morning ?

BILLY. Your silver wedding's in the air—and

likely to bide in the air. But this I'll say—old as I am—if all them people coming to the feast knowed as you'd called William Blee—a——

[GREGORY SWEET *passes behind carrying a bunch of evergreens.* BILLY *goes to him.*

Greg—have you ever seen that godless beast what they call a “lion-monkey”?

GREGORY. Can't say as I have, William.

BILLY. Then look at me!

[*Exeunt* BILLY and GREGORY.

ELIAS. No more—not a word! To-morrow I'll have it out with Robert Blanchard, and dress him down to his bones and tell him the ugly truth about himself. 'Tis almost too much! And, Beth—you hear me—you said that your father was wicked just now. I'm speaking to you, because your mother knows I'm right—dead right—and always have been, and always shall be. But you've forgot yourself to-day—as the young are so apt to do. You're bewitched this morning by the look of it; so I'll remind you that it ill becomes any Widecombe—old or young—to take a Blanchard's part against me. What next on earth? Where's your pride? Where's your decency? Where's your love for your fine family? To stand up for my anointed enemies?

BETH. There's two sides to every question, father, and your common-sense, that you're so proud of, should teach you to hear both sides.

ELIAS. Be this the end of the world? Silence directly minute, you bad woman! I thought 'twas

my silver wedding day, and then I hear my own child—my one and only one—tell me there's two sides to a Blanchard! My own flesh and blood to say it! You rash, mad wench, if you was a bit younger, I'd whip you and bawke you up in your chamber and keep you on bread and water for this—I would, till you went on your knees and begged my pardon and cussed all Blanchards as I cuss 'em. Damn the race of 'em—men, women, and childer alike! Enemies, bitter, sleepless enemies to my grandfather and my father and to me—worst of all to me! They've took our ground; they've blackened our good name; they've stolen our sweet-hearts——

AMY. Father, father—doan't 'e go ripping up the past like this! Leave the sad, forgotten things——

ELIAS. Never forgotten—never forgotten—truth's never forgotten. They've supplanted us, stole from us, and wronged us when and how they could this hundred years. And we've hit back! By God, we've rubbed it into 'em too! Hell we gave 'em! But the treachery, the wickedness—the craft, the guilt was theirs—all theirs. And Robert Blanchard's uncle——

AMY. In his grave so long, father.

ELIAS. In a hotter place than his grave if there's any justice. Us can look after Blanchards while they be alive, and trust the Dowl to see to 'em when they're dead. But why do you keep chattering about 'em? Why don't you leave 'em alone?

I'll hear no more. They shan't ruin my silver wedding day—blast 'em—whatever else they've ruined. And never again—never again, Beth, do you dare to praise 'em or to name 'em. But remember this: a Blanchard's fair words be whited sepulchres, their good wishes, cusses in disguise. Robert Blanchard's doomed so sure as the sparks fly upwards; and may he be the last of his line and soon vanish, like a dead man out of mind, to leave the earth the cleaner for his going. And now I'll have my breakfast, if you please. [*Exit ELIAS.*]

BETH. Then 'tis war against father.

AMY. Don't you say that. I won't hear no more. We'll have no treason against father. Us can't fight him, and who'd wish to? We must be patient, Beth. Patience be the only tool against your father. I ought to know. And he's right after all—remember that. What he's heard to-day proves it.

BETH. You're on his side against me, mother?

AMY. Shall our silver wedding find me on any side but his? I've known him a good bit longer than what you have, and I've known all that he and his father and his father's father was called to put up with from that quarter. 'Tis fate, I tell you. I'm sorry for the young man, but the leopard can't change his spots—never forget that.

BETH. Bob ban't a leopard; and there's no spot on him and never was.

AMY. You don't love him—don't say that?

BETH. I do. I do now. Father's shown me I

do. I weren't sure a bit ago—now I am, and short or long, rough or smooth, I'll go on his road along with him for evermore.

AMY. Think, for the Lord's love, think what you'm saying, Beth. Blanchard's doing wrong by another girl. You heard your father tell it. Be warned in time, Beth——

ELIAS. (*Off.*) Be I to starve on my silver wedding day? Breakfast, breakfast, you women!

AMY. Coming, father—Beth?

[BETH *shakes her head.* *Exit* AMY.]

BETH. [*Standing alone, and looks after her mother.*] Then 'tis just you and me, Robert. You and me; and we're equal to it, I reckon.

CURTAIN

ACT II

SCENE.—*As before. Bright sunshine fills the barn, and the great doors are wide open. The decorations are completed and GREGORY and BILLY and old JOSEPH are clearing up the leaves and fragments and putting them into baskets and a wheelbarrow.*

JOSEPH. Have he calmed down ?

BILLY. Yes, he've calmed down. But 'tis only bottled up. He may explode again at any moment.

GREGORY. He clapper-clawed me cruel after breakfast. Said if I dared to sing he'd sack me.

JOSEPH. What have made him so dangerous on his silver-wedding day, William ?

BILLY. Politics — politics, Joe—family politics. But he's better. He's cheering up. You get Charlie Pardoe to ax for your song to-night, Greg ; then he'll relent, I shouldn't wonder.

GREGORY. That's a terrible clever thought—so I will then. [*Exit GREGORY with wheelbarrow.*]

BILLY. I hope you be going to tiddivate yourself to-night, Joe. Us must all don our bestest.

JOSEPH. I promise you I'll cut a shine. My darter's youngest darter have put my famous black smock to air this morning—the one my grandmother

worked with her own hands over a hundred years ago.

BILLY. Good, Joe; then you'll be a very fine object.

JOSEPH. Yes, please God, William.

ENTER AMY. BETH *follows her with broom.*

AMY. Well done, Joseph! 'Twas a proper rogues' roost in here, but you've made it so clean as a new pin.

BETH. We'll soon have it tidy now.

JOSEPH. I hope they lanterns won't catch the roof afire. I helped to build this here barn when I was a young youth, more'n seventy years ago. Them as builded be all gone dead now but me.

[*Mournfully.*]

BILLY. No need to cry about it. You'll soon join 'em.

JOSEPH. No doubt, William; but I ain't wishful to go up over, so long as I be well thought of down here.

[*Exit JOE with basket.*]

[BETH *takes the broom and sweeps the floor.*]

BILLY. Where's Jenny to? Her did ought to be doing that.

BETH. No—she's helping cook. There's a hugeous lot to do still, and the cooking's all behind.

AMY. Have you seen master since dinner, Billy? The cloud be passed, I hope.

BILLY. Yes, it have lifted seemingly. He don't remember he skeered us out of our senses and wiped

the floor with us. He's pretty cheerful again—so cheerful as you can expect a farmer to be who's called his right-hand man a "lion-monkey."

AMY. Forget it—forget it. Where is he?

BILLY. Down in "Three Barrow Crofts." You'd think he wanted to live there.

AMY. So good as his own, of course, now.

BILLY. Yes, we've come into our kingdom at last in that matter. [*Takes broom from BETH and sweeps.*] He stands there, with his back against the cow-comfort in the middle of the field, and he be master of all he surveys. His head is full of schemes a'ready, and he leaves the gates all open and walks on air. He'll make a new heaven and a new earth out of that place I shouldn't wonder.

BETH. And forget all about the party if he isn't reminded.

AMY. No, no, he won't do that. So long as he's in a proper party humour again nought matters. Let none cross him no more to-day.

BILLY. He's terrible pleased with Jonathan Half-yard for dying; and I've begged him not to go down to Merripit to express his sorrow to the family till he can pull his face more mournful like. But he's one of they open men what can't pretend what he don't feel.

AMY. 'Tis making up for tea-time now. It might be a clever thing if you went and fetched him up.

BILLY. I'll send Gregory. I want to keep a bit of kick and sprawl in my legs for the dancing. And

by the same token, I wouldn't drink no tea if I was you. I warn everybody against tea to-day. I ban't going to let down crumb nor drop till the party myself. On such a rare occasion the wise man comes to table as empty as a drum. 'Tis only fair to the feast.

[*Exit BILLY with basket. BETH stops her work.*]

BETH. There that's about all there is to it. Now we can lay the cloth so soon as you like, mother.

AMY. You're a brave, plucky maid, and I thank you for it. To-day is sacred, whatever to-morrow brings.

BETH. Trust me. I'll be so bright as the best in company. I care for father a lot more than he cares for me.

AMY. Don't say that. Under his fierce speeches and hot words there's nought but sense, dear Beth. He's wiser than us, remember.

BETH. He ain't wiser than love, mother. No man's wiser than love.

AMY. He knows all about love too. Put it out of your mind to-day. Time cures every trouble. And don't you say I'm against you—or think it. Never, never, Beth—never in your life. Be patient—that's all—and since you're called to choose between father and lover, choose right and take your father's side for your own salvation.

BETH. Nothing can drive me from father but father himself. When he hated Bob and poured shame upon him and believed lies against him—

when he did that, it was all over, mother. Now I know what I'll answer Robert Blanchard.

AMY. Leave it—leave it till the day be done and you've got time to think.

BETH. What was on his dead mother's locket? "Always faithful." Are there any more beautiful words in the world?

AMY. There's nought more beautiful than eternal faith, I grant you.

BETH. Wasn't you always faithful? Wasn't father?

AMY. God knows we were. Such love as ours only wears brighter with the years.

BETH. Because it's solid all through. So's mine; so's Bob's.

AMY. How can you know, Beth? A young man's love is mostly like the thistledown—free as air—and light as air. 'Twill fly far—touch earth here and there—then off again. I'll whisper you a secret some day—a secret more than twenty-five years old now. But not to-day.

BETH. Robert never loved a girl afore he loved me, and he——

Enter JENNY hurriedly.

JENNY. Will 'e come in a minute, missis, and cast your eye over they tipsy cakes? They be all sideways like, and Mary's a bit down-daunted about 'em. Maybe she's put in too much strong waters from the bottle. [*A shouting of MEN off.*]

AMY. Have the pastry cook come ? The boughten cakes did ought to be here. [*Shouting again.*]

JENNY. What's Gregory bawling about ?

[*Exit JENNY followed by BETH. BETH runs back.*]

BETH. Mother ! mother ! Here's father and Bob Blanchard arm-in-arm !

AMY. "Arm-in-arm" ! You'm dreaming. Do keep the man off your lips.

BETH. They are, I tell you—arm-in-arm !

AMY. Then 'tis the end of the world.

[*They both look out in amazement.*]

ELIAS [*Off.*] Fetch me in here. I'm all right. No call for your arm. Let go. I can walk.

[*ELIAS and BOB enter. BOB is supporting ELIAS, who has lost his hat and one of his gaiters. His collar is torn off the stud, and his tie broken away. His breeches and coat are badly torn and his face is covered with earth. Mud is all over him and he has wrapped his red handkerchief round one hand. He is panting and exhausted. ROBERT is also hatless and panting. BETH runs and fetches a chair. AMY hastens to succour her husband.*]

AMY. Father ! What calamity be this ?

ELIAS. Don't fuss ; don't fuss. Give me air—I'm all right. [*Pants and shuts his eyes.*]

AMY. Oh, my good Providence, you'm torn to pieces ! [*Takes his wounded hand.*]

ROBERT. He might have been, ma'am.

ELIAS. All his fault—all that man's fault. And if he thinks I owe him thanks, he's wrong. 'Twas a put-up job very likely—a damned, vicious, wicked beast like that. I don't mean him; I mean his bull. And no business there—not a shadow of business in "Three Barrows." [*To ROBERT.*] Well you might interfere, if you didn't want to see the creature do murder; and if he had, they'd have fetched it in manslaughter against you at the least.

ROBERT. Not so bad as that, Mr Widecombe. You can't say in honesty the fault was here.

ELIAS. It be your fault to have a wicked-tempered, dangerous bull like that. And loose on my land. And I'm not beholden to you, and I'll thank you for nothing. At best you only done what any human creature would do for another.

BETH. You're human anyway, Mr Blanchard. That's something.

ELIAS. Don't you dare to speak to him!

AMY. What have happened?

ROBERT. It's like this, ma'am. The master——

ELIAS. Shut your mouth. I'll tell 'em the stark truth and no more. I was down in "Three Barrow Crofts"—mine, now Jonathan Halfyard's gone. And I was poking about and measuring the soft bit in the midst, where the rushes grow, because it will have to be drained. And just as I was getting my ideas in order, this man hollers to me like the Trump of Doom, and comes running from one side of the field, and his great, wicked, red bull come

galloping and squealing head down from the t'other. And what right him, or his bull, had in my croft, he'll have to explain, for they were trespassers both. 'Tis very black against 'em, and the law shall make him pay for it; and his bull did ought to be shot.

ROBERT. A proper fillyloo it was! Master shouting—bull bellowing—me yelling—and all running hell for leather.

ELIAS. I ran for my dear life—that's why I ran. I ran like streaks of bacon, wi' the creature after me; and 'tis only by God's mercy and my own legs he didn't overget me and drive in his horns—no matter where.

ROBERT. A wonderful runner for your age you be.

ELIAS. Don't you praise my running. I won't have no praise from you. Seeing my danger, this man did what he might to put the savage wretch off my tracks. So I kept my wits and got in the hedge and through it—head over tail t'other side—all in a jakes of a mess and tored to fragments as you see me now. And that's the middle and both ends of it—a shameful story too. But tomorrow's my time. I ain't done with you yet, Robert Blanchard, nor your bull neither.

ROBERT. You be only wrong in a fact or two, master. 'Twasn't quite like that.

ELIAS. No doubt you'll tell a different tale; but my words will stand afore yours with any Justice of the Peace, and well you know it. Tell me this: Why was your bull in my croft?

ROBERT. A fair question, and I can answer it. I can explain easy enough.

ELIAS. Yes—your breed's clever at explaining. Blanchards can explain everything. 'Tis a trick they've got along of practice. They've had such a parlous lot to explain. But they won't explain themselves into heaven—none of 'em. A bad, rascally, rakehelly crew as ever came to Dartymoor; and I hope from my heart and soul you'll be the last of 'em.

AMY. Master! Master!

ROBERT. [*Cheerful under the assault.*] Don't you wish that, master. It takes all sorts to make a world, and if there wasn't a Blanchard left to vex you, you'd never have no grievance at all.

ELIAS. You may laugh, my bold hero, but them laugh loudest who laugh last. You've got to prove this weren't a planned felony against me; and you best be gone now, because we want none but friends around us to-day.

ROBERT. You'll always have a friend around you so long as I'm at Twelve Trees, Mr Widecombe.

ELIAS. Take that back—I won't have it. Be oil and vinegar friends? Be good and evil friends? 'Tis against the laws of nature for your race and mine to come together. We'm so different as the moonlight from the Jacky toads in the bogs. Mend, if you can, Robert Blanchard. Fight the blood in your veins if you can, for I tell you 'tis rank poison. But never come here no more. Never put your foot on no bit of earth as belongs to me.

*Enter BILLY with GREGORY behind, both
are blowing.*

BILLY. God send you ban't hurted, master. We've catched him. We've catched "Turk"—a terrible job, but he's safe in his house at last.

ELIAS. "Turk"? Our bull too? Be all the bulls mad to-day?

BILLY. "Turk" got loose into "Three Barrow Crofts" because you left all the gates open; and he's been raging round as if the place belonged to him ever since he missed the seat of your trousers.

GREGORY. And it have took me and Billy and Jack and Rupert and four dogs a proper struggle to get 'un out and put home the gate behind him.

ELIAS. "Turk" in "Three Barrows"?

BILLY. He was. He ain't now. But he's seeing red to-day. I never knowed him so wilful since us brought him to Princetown Fair as a calf five years ago.

ROBERT. When I bought my bull—eh, Billy Blee?

BILLY. So like as two peas they were; but I had the best of 'em.

ELIAS. My bull!

ROBERT. "Turk" likes "Three Barrows" so well as you do seemingly.

BILLY. Might almost have knowed 'twas going to belong to us. Go and see if he's calmed down, Greg.

[Exit GREGORY.]

ELIAS. My bull—my “Turk”?

BILLY. Why, who’s bull should it be?

ELIAS. Not this man’s bull?

BILLY. Mr Blanchard’s bull be six fields off, down in Snipe Bottom.

ELIAS. [*To ROBERT.*] Then what right had you to come between me and my bull? Answer that.

AMY. There!—there, Elias! Enough quarrels for one day. Thank God, ’tis no worse.

ELIAS. You egged him on—you egged on my bull!

ROBERT. I egged him off, master, I do assure you.

AMY. If he’d caught you—to-day of all days! Come and tidy yourself and drink a drop of brandy and let me wash your face. Don’t cross the young man no more—thank him—thank him, for our joy might have been turned into sorrow, and your silver wedding day your last.

ELIAS. I’m the most reasonable man on Darty-moor as we all know, and if it can be proved ’twas my bull, then the case ain’t so black against you, Blanchard. But I must have proofs ’twas my “Turk.” And never you set foot on no land of mine again, even if you see me being eat alive by a pack of wolves. I won’t have it, I tell you.

ROBERT. [*Laughing.*] All right, farmer, I promise.

ELIAS. Then us will leave it at that. Now I’ll let down a spot of spirits, mother. I’m shook. I don’t deny I’m shook. And don’t let anybody mention this day’s work to me no more, else I may rap out and astonish ’em. But this I will say—

AMY. Come, my dear man. All's well that ends well.

ELIAS. No Blanchard ever ended well, and the man mustn't hope for it. And if anybody had told me that "Turk" would——

[Exeunt AMY and ELIAS. They are heard talking as they go.]

ROBERT. Lord, Beth, you *have* got a father!

BILLY. Thanks to you, Bob.

ROBERT. Was ever such a wonnerful man?

BILLY. Not to know his own bull!

ROBERT. What's made Mr Widecombe so comical tempered?

BETH. 'Tis the party and the flare up this evening.

BILLY. I'd forgive any man most anything as have lived in wedlock for five-and-twenty year; but there's a limit. Called me a "lion-monkey" afore breakfast this morning.

ROBERT. Did he now? That was coming it strong—eh?

BILLY. A plaguey sight too strong, and I say no honest man ought to call another a monkey—when you think of the way monkeys behave. But I've forgiven him, and I hope his God will.

[Exit BILLY.]

BETH. Father's strong point is common sense, Robert. Perhaps you've noticed that?

ROBERT. Ah! And "Turk's" strong point be the tip of his right horn. 'Twas touch and go. But I couldn't help laughing. To see him in that hedge, poor old blid!

BETH. Have a drop of cider before you go ?

ROBERT. No—I want something better'n cider.

BETH. What d'you mean ?

ROBERT. I mean where we left off, when I bolted out of yonder window at cock-light this morning.

BETH. Where we left off ?

ROBERT. On the corn-bin. Say it—say you love me, Beth—whisper it if you be feared to speak out loud. [*Goes to her.*] Say it, Beth !

BETH. I do love you—I love you more than anything on earth, Bob.

ROBERT. Praise God for all His blessings then !

BETH. I know it now—I know it now. [*In his arms.*] 'Tis like coming home after a journey. With all my heart and soul I love you, and I have loved you for weeks and weeks and never understood. I've worshipped your footfall and your shadow. 'Twas a red-letter day if I heard you whistle over the hedge even.

ROBERT. Haven't I envied the blessed sheep-dogs when you called 'em ?

BETH. And I'll go on loving you closer and closer and dearer and dearer. The harder father takes it, the better and faithfuller I'll love you, Bob.

ROBERT. Naught can keep us apart, I reckon, if you feel that way.

BETH. No—don't kiss me no more—I must talk. We're up against it, Robert. Us'll have to do valiant deeds, and—go on kissing me—just now and again.

ROBERT. Kiss me back then. I like 'em quite

so well as you. Us must fight, but how can a young man fight an old one? Won't he never listen to reason?

BETH. Love ban't nothing without a bit of crossing.

ROBERT. Burn it all, Beth, I don't want no crossing. You've been going to the pictures, I reckon.

BETH. You'll have to run away with me. And he'll come after and hunt us down and find we be married. Bob! Bob! I want it to happen.

ROBERT. Stuff and nonsense! Run away? I never runned away from anything in my life—afore this afternoon.

BETH. You was in danger too—oh, Bob!

ROBERT. What's the man got against me—tell me that?

BETH. You're a Blanchard—that's all there is to it.

ROBERT. Well—he's a Widecombe, and that's all there is to him. The young must be patient with the old, I suppose.

BETH. That's only fair, no doubt, because the old was patient with us once.

ROBERT. I'll be kind to him. I'll break his heart with kindness. I'll kill him with kindness, Beth! That's what Master Charles does. I see him turn down to the "Green Man" after dinner. Lord! I'd like to watch him to-night—dancing with you. I ban't feared of Charles Pardoe no more. Let him down gently, poor wretch. Your

father's the trouble. He's put me in a proper hole now.

BETH. How, Robert?

ROBERT. Why; you can't say to a man, "I've done you a good turn, so give me your darter!"

BETH. If he won't give, then you must take. Hasn't he had enough luck to-day? His silver wedding and his escape from "Turk"; and more good fortune beside, for "Three Barrow Crofts" are going to be his at last. [ROBERT starts.] Yes, he's got first refusal and means to buy them. That's why he was down there to-day. His head's full of the place.

ROBERT. Well, if that don't put the lid on! "Three Barrows"? You mean it, Beth?

BETH. Yes, I do. Never say you want 'em, Bob. You mustn't want 'em over father.

ROBERT. 'Tisn't whether I want 'em or not. The "Crofts" are mine.

BETH. Yours! How can that be?

ROBERT. Easy enough. I did poor Jonathan Halfyard a good turn a while ago. Put myself about for the man when he was sick, and went up the country for him and made a tidy bargain. I'd forgot it—but he didn't forget, and three days afore he died, he sent for me and told me he'd made a new will——

BETH. Charlie's got his will.

ROBERT. Charlie hasn't. He fell out with Charlie six months ago over—no matter—and made a new will that Pardoe had nought to do with. And he's

left "Three Barrow Crofts" to me, knowing they would be mighty useful and a great addition to my place. All mine under a dead man's hand beyond shadow of doubt.

BETH. Father will say this is another wicked plot and hate you worse than ever, Robert.

ROBERT. [*Scratching his head.*] What a world—eh? Perhaps you're wrong. Perhaps I'll offer the ground to him in friendship.

BETH. He'd die afore he'd take anything from you.

ROBERT. And yet I be going to take something from him. Would he rather have you or the "Crofts," I wonder?

BETH. It's a terrible puzzler.

ROBERT. To-morrow I'll see him. I wish I could come to the party to-night and share the fun. My heart be full of nought but good to the man. I shall sit glumping all alone all the evening and see you in your frill-de-dils, so pretty as a pixy, dancing—with Charlie.

BETH. I shall be lonely too.

ROBERT. And I'm so cruel fond of dancing, Beth.

BETH. List then; at nine o'clock you go up to King Tor and I'll slip out o' the barn and pop round behind the linhay. Then I shall see you up along in the moonlight. And I'll just stand and listen to the music and think of nought but you; and you'll think of nought but me—for five blessed minutes. Will you? And I'll dream I'm dancing with you and—

ROBERT. Hold on! I've got a cleverer thought than that. You come down behind the linhay—that's all right; but you needn't dream we be dancing—we damn well will dance, my pretty dear—for I'll be there too!

BETH. You wonder! Dare you do it? And I shan't care if you dance away with me altogether, Bob.

ROBERT. Perhaps I will. One more to go on with. [*Kisses her.*] I'll be hunger-starved by nine o'clock.

Enter AMY WIDECOMBE.

AMY. Best to go now, Robert. And God bless you for saving my old man. [*Takes his hand.*]

ROBERT. More trouble, Mrs Widecombe.

AMY. I'll hear no more trouble.

ROBERT. The master mustn't hear no more—that's the point. We'll fix up this somehow, if his pride will only listen to reason. Beth can tell you. I must be gone. [*Looking at watch.*] I've got to meet a young party as I forgot.

BETH. Don't forget t'other young party.

[*Exit ROBERT.*]

AMY. "More trouble," he said. But let it bide till to-morrow anyway. Father have calmed down. What a strange chance them two should meet.

BETH. No chance, mother; Providence I call it.

AMY. What's right will happen. 'Tis a blessed thought we can always fall back on.

BETH. Then what's right have happened about "Three Barrows," I suppose.

AMY. For certain. Father's putting the land afore his silver wedding and his party and everything. 'Twill keep him cheerful and busy for a month of Sundays.

BETH. He can't have the "Crofts."

AMY. Can't have 'em! Why, Merripit Farm's to be cut up and Pardoe's promised father first refusal months ago.

BETH. Pardoe's promised what he can't perform then. Master Charlie's a day behind the fair, for Jonathan Halfyard made a new will and left "Three Barrow Crofts" to Bob Blanchard.

AMY. The wretch! 'Twas done to spite father!

BETH. No; to pay Robert, who'd made Jonathan Halfyard care about him—same as he makes most people. It was only one good turn for another. Father's got nothing to do with it.

AMY. He'll have a mighty lot to do with it—trust him. I wouldn't have had this happen for—Do Charlie know?

BETH. He may by now.

AMY. Then, for God's sake, ask him to keep his mouth shut to-night. 'Twill wreck the revel if father hears.

Enter BILLY.

BILLY. Master's down there again! He's planning a cattle byre now. He's asking for the lawyer already.

AMY. They mustn't meet—not yet—not till you've seen Charlie, Beth. Best run over to the "Green Man" and head him off. Tell him not a word to-day.

BILLY. Pardoe be down to Halfyard's now.

AMY. [*To Beth.*] Then go there. We must set about the table when you come back. Where's my string bag and the big scissors. [*Looks about and collects the things.*] The musickers can have their chairs set on the corn-bin, then they'll be out of the way and all clear for the dancing. Don't you be too long, Beth. Get after Charlie. [*Exit BETH.*]

BILLY. After Charlie, be you? What is it now, then?

BETH. You'll know soon enough.

BILLY. Perhaps I do know already. As one of the family, there did ought to be no secrets from me. Is he the man, miss?

BETH. He is not the man, William, and never will be.

BILLY. Then I'm damn glad, because—well—I won't speak ill of a lawyer—not a word—too dangerous. I'd lick any man's boots rather than go to law with him. But I mistrust Lawyer Pardoe.

BETH. There's better than him—nearer than Plymouth too.

BILLY. That's right—that's right. And nowa-days, with the world on the down-grade, 'tis a blessing to find a man here and there built in the good old pattern.

BETH. The world on the down-grade! It's a perfect world, Billy!

BILLY. Aye—at your age it may look so; but I can call home a better one than you'll ever see. Maids don't stitch like they used, and men don't stand to work like they did. Cream ban't so thick, nor butter so fine. The sun ain't so warm as it used to be, nor yet the moon so bright. Men can't drink so hard, nor sing old songs, nor tell brave stories nowadays. Us don't hang half the wicked rascals we used to hang. Us don't pray to God and trust Him like we did, nor yet get barrow-loads of children like we did. The old heroes be mostly gone to heaven in my opinion, and all the grand old rogues to hell. Even I myself—I ban't what I used to be. I ain't got the old fire. I can't carry on so dashing. My vices and my virtues be both very near gone. My brain's drying up same as a last year's walnut. I hear it rattle of a night sometimes when I lie awake with the rheumatics gnawing.

[The village clock chimes four.]

BETH. I must go and see Charlie quick.

ELIAS. *[Off.]* Amy—Amy!

BETH. *[Drawing back from the door.]* Here's father in another turmoil. God send he hasn't seen Pardoe.

ELIAS. *[Off.]* Proof! Proof! Proof, I tell you!

BILLY. Dally-buttons! The apple-cart over again!

BETH. He ain't angry—he's pleased.

Enter ELIAS, followed by AMY. ELIAS wears another pair of gaiters and another hat. He is chuckling with triumph.

ELIAS. Now you'll believe me—now you'll see who's right as usual. My own eyes marked it and the dirty truth of the man laid bare. 'Tis out—the worthless rip.

BETH. What do you mean, father?

ELIAS. A Blanchard to his flesh and bones—a Blanchard through and through. Not ten minutes ago and these eyes saw it—in broad daylight.

AMY. What did you see, father?

ELIAS. Straight from here he must have gone—straight to Caunter's girl. And I, standing under the hedge in “Three Barrows,” making a bit of a picture of the new byre—I heard him t'other side of the bank—him and that forsaken wench.

[The mention of ROBERT and CAUNTER'S GIRL is a great shock to BETH. She suppresses a cry and listens intently.]

BILLY. You be off the scent, master.

ELIAS. God's light! Don't I know what the woman is?

AMY. Not afore Beth, father.

ELIAS. Yes, afore Beth, and afore everybody. He gave her money—I saw it pass between 'em—a dollop of it, and she kissed his hateful hand—that I'll swear! Then he patted her shoulder and would have had his arms round her body in a

minute; but I snorted in my glee to have caught 'em, and they saw me and went off. And Caunter knows it to-morrow—and all the world beside. That's not all neither, for just after I come on Molly at the corner stile—was on her afore she could hide the stuff. She was counting it—counting her damnation! And that's Bob Blanchard!

BILLY. May I speak?

ELIAS. No, you may not speak, if you'd take his part. Not a word will I hear again for him. Providence have gived the dog into my hand, and now you know the wicked truth of him. Never again will I hear his name named. Let him be uprooted out of the land and his race forgot.

AMY. Molly Caunter! 'Tis hard to believe she's bad as that.

BILLY. There's a thing that did ought to be said——

ELIAS. And I've said it. And you've heard it. And them that want to lessen his sin, or whitewash the blackguard, don't bide under my roof no more, mind that. His friends be my enemies for ever.

BILLY. In common sense——

ELIAS. Dang-my-wig, William Blee, haven't I talked enough about common sense this morning? Common sense and common decency and right and reason's all on one side this time; and that's my side; and every God-fearing, respectable, honest person's on my side. [*To BETH.*] And that's the wretch you stuck up for—you baggage! 'Tis beyond belief a Widecombe could sink so low.

BETH. Robert Blanchard is coming across the yard this minute.

ELIAS. To explain—mark me! To hoodwink us with new lies. If I had my riding-stock, I'd do justice and lace his jacket afore you women.

Enter ROBERT. He carries the battered hat and legging ELIAS dropped in "Three Barrow Crofts." The hat is done for. The light is now growing mellow towards evening.

ROBERT. [*Smiling.*] Back like a bad penny, master; but I've fetched up your hat and gaiter from the hedge. [*Holds them out.*]

ELIAS. I'll touch nought that your hand have touched. Put 'em on the midden, Billy.

ROBERT. [*Dropping hat and gaiter.*] What's afire now? More trouble? I ban't poisonous, surely.

ELIAS. Ain't you? I say you are. And what I say to-day the people believe to-morrow. Since you be here, list to me once for all.

ROBERT. [*To BETH.*] What have I done . . . the "Crofts"?

BETH. I don't know what you've done, but father reckons he does.

ELIAS. Don't you speak to her—don't you speak to anybody. You listen to me, and then go and call on the hills to cover you. I say this: you be following the wicked footsteps of your dead uncle, Andrew Blanchard.

AMY. Elias!

ROBERT. And proud to—proud to follow Andrew Blanchard.

ELIAS. Hark to that! “Proud to”!

ROBERT. Steady down, master—steady down, or you’ll anger me. No man’s got the right to talk to me like this, and I’ll hear no word against Andrew Blanchard—from you or any other.

ELIAS. But you shall. He was a traitor with women; and so be you. He came between two that loved each other, and he stole the girl away and broke the man’s heart and let the woman go to the devil. That’s God’s truth about Andrew Blanchard; and you’re as bad—your blasted uncle over again.

ROBERT. Blackguard me if you like, you old fool, but—not him. I’ll answer for him—he can’t for himself. My Uncle Andrew was as good a man as you—as straight as you, as well thought upon as you, and a damned sight bigger-minded and better tempered than you. He fought fair in all his dealings with man or woman; and if he lost in the end, he lost like a gentleman and never yelped about it. He sent no woman to the devil. Honest as the light he was, and, please God, I’m honest too. You’re daft to say these things, or think them. ’Tis lies—all wicked lies.

ELIAS. Very well, then—let dead dogs be. “Lies” you say? Is it a lie you be now come from carneying and cuddling Molly Caunter?

[Robert starts.]

ROBERT. I——

ELIAS. Is it a lie you was with her in the wood nigh her father's cottage after dark two nights agone and her father saw you? Is it a lie you're out to ruin the woman if you haven't done so a'ready? Is it a lie you was giving her money not half an hour since? And that I saw her counting it by the stile? You think to blind all eyes, your Maker's included, but you don't blind mine. Now we know why for you took back that scamp Jack Caunter when he was in disgrace. For Molly no doubt. And why you gave him another chance after he'd robbed you at "Twelve Trees." For Molly again. A fool as well as a lewd rascal you are. The first Blanchard that was a fool anyway. And brag no more of your honesty or decency. Be off out of this; go to your hussies; keep in the mire where you belong.

ROBERT. So that's it! By God, I'm sorry for you, Elias Widecombe! To carry hate down from generation to generation—a dirty load for your old heart sure enough. [*To BETH.*] And what say you to this, Beth?

ELIAS. Keep her name off your lips, you black-guard!

ROBERT. [*To BETH.*] Answer him—tell him it's a lie.

[*BETH is going to say she doesn't believe it when her mother touches her arm. BETH looks round at her and then at ROBERT—and hesitates.*]

BETH. Explain to father, Robert.

ROBERT. Only one woman on God's earth have ever seen me make love to her.

ELIAS. Bah! "Love"!

AMY. Robert Blanchard, answer this: Did you give Molly Caunter money?

ROBERT. I did—ten pounds.

AMY. Did she kiss your hand?

ROBERT. She did—silly girl. And master looking through the hedge saw her do it.

ELIAS. You stand there, afore honest women, and ban't ashamed to be alive?

ROBERT. No more shamed than Molly was.

AMY. We've heard enough, I think.

ELIAS. Out on you, godless lecher!

BETH. Father, I——

ELIAS. [*To BETH.*] Go in the house. This is no place for you.

AMY. [*To BETH.*] Don't—'tis vain now.

ROBERT. [*To BETH.*] Speak, Beth. Have you got nought to say?

BETH. For the Lord's sake, explain.

ROBERT. "Explain"! Be a man called to explain to the first blustering bully that holds a pistol at his head? He told me this morning that Blanchards were clever at explaining. Not always. I'll explain nought—— If trust is dead——

BETH. I didn't say trust was dead.

ROBERT. Your eyes be saying it now. And where trust has gone, 'tis no part for me to call it home again. I'll explain nought, I say. Let them

explain who hate me for nothing. Let them explain who'd hound me into the gutter. Leave it so—till you explain that to me. I'm no model man—never pretended to be, Elias Widecombe. But I'm no hypocrite either. So think as you please and be damned to you. And I don't deny anything at all. If there's nobody here who knows that I'm a wronged man, then the case is black against me sure enough.

ELIAS. Black as hell on your own showing.

ROBERT. That's right. Don't spare me. Shout it to the parson and the people. Warn the maidens and the women and little childer against me—aye, and the dogs and cats. Let all know I ban't fit to neighbour with respectable folk; and then, if they fear God and walk uprightly before men, same as you do, they'll rise up and hound me out of the parish—and a good riddance.

BETH. Robert!

ROBERT. Good-bye, Beth. You trust your father from this day forward. He'll explain things. He'll make right and wrong so clear as day. A tower of strength him—so just and fair—trust him. A woman needs to trust something, but not a Blanchard. Blanchards must explain how they dare to be born and breathe God's air. There's death in the name o' Blanchard.

AMY. Best to go, young man.

ROBERT. I'm going, ma'am. And warn Molly Caunter against me afore 'tis too late, and tell her father to lie in the hedge for me and put a bullet

through my head. 'Tis all I deserve—a man who won't explain when Elias Widecombe commands.

[*Exit* ROBERT.

BILLY. [*To himself.*] Laughing at us all the time.

ELIAS. Doomed—doomed—doomed afore he was born!

BILLY. And you was saved afore you was born, I reckon. But you'm wrong—wrong—all wrong, I tell you; and I hope to God as you'll know it afore 'tis too late.

ELIAS. You—you——

BILLY. Say it again—say it again! Call me a damn gorilla if you mind to! And me made in the Lord's image!

[*ELIAS storms out in a great passion.* BETH weeps.

AMY. There'll be skellingtons at the feast, sure enough.

CURTAIN

ACT III

SCENE.—*As before. The party is ended. The barn is gaily lighted with Chinese lanterns hanging in two festoons across roof. Two large branched Sheffield plate candlesticks are shedding light above the remains of the feast on the long table. Chairs pushed back, some fallen. A chair or two stands on the corn-bin. The big main doors of the barn are wide open and the night is clear and full of blue haze and moonlight.*

[BILLY, in his black Sunday suit, is lowering down one festoon of lanterns. ELIAS is clad in Sunday suit with red tie and a red rose in his buttonhole. AMY wears black silk gown with gold trinkets—also the locket that ROBERT gave her. BETH is in white muslin with flowers in her hair; the three stand together waving to the departed guests. From the distance the sound of singing sinks gradually. MEN and WOMEN joining in the song. A clarionet pipes a thin accompaniment. GREGORY and JOSEPH stand outside in yard. All listen.]

MEN AND WOMEN. [*Off.*]

The wedding bells be sweet to hear,
Good morn, good neighbours all,

A-ringing out so loud and clear,
The bestest moosic of the year,
Good morn, good neighbours all.

WOMEN. Good morn !

MEN. Good morn !

WOMEN. Good morn !

MEN. Good morn !

ALL. Good morn, good neighbours all,
Good morn, good neighbours all.

MEN AND WOMEN. [*Still farther off.*]

'Tis done—a happy life to you,
Good day, good neighbours all,
May love be long, may love be true,
And warm your hearts all through and through,
Good-day, good neighbours all.

[*Chorus as before.*]

ELIAS. And so it have warmed our hearts, boys,
and so it will do.

*Enter JENNY, in pink, with JOSEPH'S
big muffler and hat.*

JENNY. Be they all gone ? Old Joe wanted an
arm to see him home along.

ELIAS. Here, Greg, you run after the Worths and
tell 'em to bide a minute for Joseph.

[*Exit GREGORY.*]

AMY. [*While JENNY puts JOSEPH'S muffler on for
him.*] Wrap up your throat, Joe. Your smock was
the joy of the women. You don't see such work
now.

JOSEPH. And you don't see such women as my grandmother now, ma'am. Her needle never rested nor rusted, but she wore out many a thimble.

[Shouts and faint laughter off. The sound of the third verse of song, but the words cannot be distinguished. For third verse see end of Act.]

BILLY. Uncle Pomeroy's clarinet be game to the last. A marvellous man. Ninety-one last fall, he says.

JOSEPH. Pomeroy's a liar! I be ninety-two come Christmas, and I was seven year old when Pomeroy was born. He's always vaunted himself above me; but he ban't near so old as me, nor yet so wonnerful as me.

ELIAS. No, no, Joseph—nobody's so wonderful as you.

ENTER GREGORY.

JOSEPH. I ban't never bosky-eyed like him—drunken old swine.

GREGORY. Come on, Joe—the Worths be gone and Jenny and me will see you back.

JOSEPH. Good-night all. I'll be up to work so bright as a star in the morning.

BETH. Have you got the cakes for your granddaughter?

JOSEPH. They be stored in my breeches' pocket, miss.

[Exit JOSEPH on GREGORY's arm, followed by JENNY.]

ELIAS. A brave rally of good folks.

AMY. And no man deserves his friends better'n you.

ELIAS. I know the friend I've got to thank for all my good luck—the friend of my life.

AMY. A proper party sure enough, and all so happy as birds on a bough.

[AMY and ELIAS walk out into the moonlight.

BETH helps BILLY lower the second string of lanterns and extinguish them.

BILLY. Jane White weren't happy. She's never happy when other folk are.

BETH. Did you enjoy yourself, Billy?

BILLY. Enjoy myself? Look at my buttons! [*He shows that his waistcoat buttons over his stomach are undone.*] I often hoped, by the will of God, I'd have my way with boundless liquor and victuals once before I was called home, and to-night I did.

BETH. You'll be ill to-morrow.

BILLY. I shall, I know I shall, but who cares for to-morrow on a night like this? I shall be wishing I was dead afore morning; but 'twas worth it.

BETH. You got my letter to Mr Blanchard?

BILLY. I did. I slipped across an hour ago—and put it into Bob's own hand.

BETH. He took it?

BILLY. Like a dog takes a bone. [Sings.

“The wedding bells be sweet to hear,
Good morn, good neighbours all.”

BETH. There'll never be no wedding bells for me, Billy.

BILLY. Don't you say that. 'Tis a case where to-morrow can be trusted a long sight better than to-day. Master's pretty well worn out. He'll be so quiet as a lamb to-morrow, I shouldn't wonder. You tackle him to-morrow!

BETH. Hush! Father'll hear you. Was Bob pleased?

BILLY. Pleased! He danced for joy you may say.

BETH. I've given him something to dance about anyway.

[Exeunt BETH and BILLY carrying a tray of crockery.]

ELIAS. *[To AMY.]* Come in and sit you down half a minute. There's a drop of Jerry Pitman's sherry left. Now us'll have a glass for our own good luck. I lay you've not wetted your lips to-night looking after other people. *[Pours sherry into two glasses.]*

[AMY sits down and he puts his hand on her shoulder.]

We've come well through it, missis. When you get to middle age, 'tis a happy thing that past joys stick in your mind and past sorrows slip away.

AMY. Thank God humans are built so, Elias.

ELIAS. A contented life we've led, and never called to bear more than we could bear.

AMY. We've made each other's happiness for twenty-five years.

ELIAS. And why for shouldn't we put in for

another twenty-five year? My father had a golden wedding day a week afore he was took. Then we'll set out to do the same. But mayhap your heart sinks a bit at the thought of another quarter century with me? [*Drinks and fills his glass again.*]

AMY. I shall cherish the years to come so dearly as the years that be gone, Elias.

ELIAS. Here's to our golden wedding then! Us'll go down the hill together so mellow as this here liquor down my throat.

AMY. But happiness mustn't make us selfish, master. When folk love each other like we do, they forget there's anybody else in the world but themselves.

ELIAS. Wish we had a chance to. The other people take mighty good care you shan't forget 'em—specially them as you want to forget most. I have my faults—yes, yes, I have—and nobody knows 'em better than you—at least I hope nobody does. You've kept my secrets, I reckon! But selfish I am not. I want for everybody to be as content as myself; and if all the other fools would only listen to me, no doubt they might be.

AMY. There's one dearer than any—our own—our Beth.

ELIAS. I know that. I've forgiven her too. I forgave everybody afore I axed God to bless the feast. I don't mean for Beth to bide here till our golden wedding. Poor fun that for a maiden. Did you see her dancing along with Charlie Pardoe to-night? A pretty pair—eh?

AMY. Don't let your mind run on Lawyer Pardoe.

ELIAS. And why not? You're that humble—our daughter's good enough for him.

AMY. A long way too good, master.

ELIAS. That's a fond mother speaking. I think very well of the man. He's clever and shrewd and have a great trick to get in with the bettermost people. He'll make his mark.

AMY. But, Elias—

ELIAS. Trust me, I know her value. We'll have it all in writing and down on the nail. He wants to see me on important business to-morrow, and I think I can guess what it is. All looks very hopeful now that Beth knows the truth about that forsaken scamp at "Twelve Trees."

Enter BILLY.

You leave Beth to me.

AMY. She can't abide him.

ELIAS. Can't abide him? Nonsense. If I say a man is right, he is right. I read the young people like books—eh, Billy?

BILLY. Not when they be lawyers. No man can read a lawyer, and damn few wants to.

Enter BETH.

AMY. Did you have your sherry wine, William?

BILLY. I did, ma'am—the only blot in the evening. The smell be comforting, but the taste—oh, Lord!

'Tis often better to hope for a bit of luck than get it. But let the tipples go. 'Twas a great night, and my only sad thought be that I shall never see such another.

ELIAS. You wait for our golden wedding day, Billy.

BILLY. You mustn't hope that. 'Twould take me into my second hundred. No, no—I shall be walking the golden streets myself afore that—and hungering cruel after Dartmoor no doubt. I lay the Happy Land won't want so much muck on it as what ours do; but us must hope for nice open weather, and seed time and harvest, and the cattle—else Heaven ban't no use to the likes of me.

ELIAS. Good-night, good-night, old chap!

AMY. Good-night, Billy.

BILLY. Good-night all. May the Lord bless the family—and watch over my supper.

[Exit by small door.]

[ELIAS laughs, shuts the main doors of the barn and locks them. AMY puts out the candles on table. BETH lights a horn lantern, which she leaves on the table.]

BETH. Good-night, dear mother.

AMY. Good-night, my pretty. You're tired, I reckon. It have been a long day for 'e.

ELIAS. Tired! Not her! She'd start a jig with Charlie this minute and keep it up till morning, I dare say.

BETH. Good-night, dear father. *[Kisses him.]*

ELIAS. Good-night and pleasant dreams of a fine

young man with blue eyes and curly hair, my girl!

[BETH goes off by small door.

None like her! She made all the other maidens look homely, didn't she?

AMY. Father, think twice about Beth.

ELIAS. [*Taking a final glass of sherry.*] And haven't I? Beth will be married afore Christmas. I promise it, and what I promise I perform.

AMY. I know well how you trust me, or I shouldn't speak; but there's five-and-twenty year of love behind us, and they make me brave.

ELIAS. Speak on then. Your voice is the music I best love to hear—after hounds.

AMY. You was twenty-seven before you fell in love with me, Elias.

ELIAS. The right age for a man, as I've always said. Pardoe is twenty-seven.

AMY. Plenty happens to a man afore that. He knows there be women in the world long afore then.

ELIAS. What's that to us?

AMY. Nothing now. But once—look back, Elias—to the time when I was nought to you, when there was only one. D'you think I ever forget you loved and lost? D'you think that great sorrow weren't sacred to me—always? First love's a precious thing—a holy fire, Elias; and if 'tis blown out—there—you understand. You was called to that bitterness.

ELIAS. It never left a mark however.

AMY. Never—never. All your love I've had. But you know—you know—you're wise, and you

wouldn't wish for any child of yours to suffer the same.

ELIAS. I'd not wish any created thing to suffer if I could save 'em.

AMY. Married life was only a second best for you.

ELIAS. Never say that, my dear. No man ever had better luck in his home and his partner than me. Annabel Brendon loved me well enough. But the poor fool loved Andrew Blanchard better—or thought she did. Not her fault, but her misfortune, and his wicked guile. I doubt not he lied; and he was paid, for he lost her too. So we both lost her; and for me she was forgotten out of mind, long afore me and you met. Let her find her peace in the grave and her forgiveness beyond it. 'Tis no tale to rake up to-night.

AMY. Aye, but it is, my dear, dear man. You wouldn't have your Beth unhappy all her days? You wouldn't have her linked to a husband she couldn't love?

ELIAS. Trust me. I'm quick to feel. I'll not forget what you say. I've only one wish outside your happiness, and that's our girl's. I've opened her eyes to-day and it hurt her. It always hurts the young to be up against the wickedness of the world. She didn't understand that Blanchard's race be the serpent under the heel of ours. But she knows it now; and her heart's clean and empty, again. Empty, and we must help her to fill it.

AMY. Put love of her first then—not the lawyer. Let her heart alone to heal. Let time pass, Elias, afore you name another.

[ELIAS picks up lantern.

ELIAS. Time will pass quick enough. Time flies with the boys and girls. And ban't we boy and girl again to-night ?

AMY. You'll always be a boy to me, I reckon.

[*They go off arm-in-arm through small door.*

ELIAS locks it behind him and sound of key is heard.

[*The stage is now dark save for moonlight from the lofty window. After a brief pause a shadow fills the aperture and ROBERT BLANCHARD appears at window. He waits and listens a few seconds, then he descends as in first Act, and goes to big doors. He unlocks them cautiously, opens them a little way and looks out. Then BETH enters and he shuts doors. The actions of first Act are exactly repeated.*

BETH. Bob—Bob !

[*She hesitates and he goes to her.*

ROBERT. Thank God, my blessed girl ! Thank God, you could write.

BETH. Forgive me !

ROBERT. 'Tis for me to ask that.

BETH. I was mazed to doubt you. Kiss me—say you've forgiven. How I've lived through to-night, God knows.

ROBERT. [*Embracing her.*] Naught matters if we're

alive and together. I'll never lose your blessed letter.

BETH. I had to write it——

ROBERT. I'm ashamed of myself for making you write it—an ass I was—too proud to tell your father the silly truth.

BETH. Never did you tell anything but truth. I trust you, Robert, trust you wi' body and soul.

ROBERT. And what else matters, Beth?

BETH. Did you remember when the clock struck nine? I ran out to the linhay—and you weren't there—and I sat down and cried.

ROBERT. My dear, my dear! [*He takes her in his arms.*] I've been thinking to-night over this terrible upstore. My sins be pretty light where Molly Caunter's the matter, and that's easy to make clear. But what about you, Bethlet, and what about "Three Barrow Crofts"?

BETH. Trust you to find the way out.

ROBERT. The lands are naught. He can have the lands.

BETH. No, no, Bob. Father wouldn't think no better of you if you was to offer him "Three Barrows."

ROBERT. Then I'll give you the fields and you can give 'em to him.

BETH. That won't do neither—he'd see through that mighty quick.

ROBERT. Bagger the fields! Us'll leave that then. 'Tis a proper quandary. I can pardon the old folk; but 'tis cruel difficult to forgive the

middle-aged. They mess up everything they touch and think the world belongs to 'em. And it do mostly—worse luck.

BETH. You might well be too proud to answer father.

ROBERT. I was wrong not to answer him—just as wrong as he was to bullyrag me. We'll never get closer—him and me—if he be going to think I'm made of poison.

BETH. I'll rise to anything for 'e, Bob. I'll travel to the world's end for 'e. Could us get parson to have a tell with father?

ROBERT. We could—parson's all right; but I'd a sight sooner have it out—man to man—and no go-between; but you—did Charlie offer himself?

BETH. Oh yes, he offered, and wouldn't believe it when I said "no." Told me I must be light-headed.

[An agitated knocking is heard outside big barn door.]

Who's that?

[Clings to ROBERT.]

BILLY *[Off.]* For the love of the Lord, you two! They're coming!

[ROBERT opens large door and BILLY puts his head in—then enters. He is attired in his day shirt, in which he sleeps, and has on a pair of corduroy breeches. His legs are bare from his knees, but he has put on boots. He wears a scarlet night-cap, drawn well down over his ears, and carries a lantern.]

ROBERT. Billy, by Gosh !

BILLY. Bolt, you young zany, if you don't want a charge of birdshot in your innards. The missis went to comfort you [*to Beth*] and you wasn't there, and now she says you've run away to drown yourself. But master thinks you've gone to this chap—and he's got down his gun.

ROBERT. It'll be like the "pictures" all right then—eh, Beth ?

BETH. Go—go—for God's sake ! I'll face him.

ROBERT. Go ? Not me ! If he wants it to-night, he shall have it to-night. I'll get it off my chest anyway and sleep the better.

BILLY. Be everybody mad ? Run, or you'll run no more ! He's had his whack of liquor, and he'll fire on you so sure as death if he finds you here.

ROBERT. Open the doors, William, and let in the fresh air. I ban't feared of farmer.

BILLY. [*Opens the big doors.*] He'll manslaughter 'e ; and if he misses you, 'tis any odds he'll hit me. He's no shot best o' times.

[*The lock is turned in small door and voice of ELIAS is heard shouting.*]

AMY. [*Off.*] Beth ! Beth ! 'Tis your father, Beth !

[*The door opens and ELIAS appears. He carries a gun, wears a white "dickey" and white shirt cuffs and a grey flannel shirt without collar. Red braces hanging down behind and red slippers. His hair is on end. AMY follows with a lamp in*]

her hand. She has not doffed any of her clothes.

ELIAS. [*Furiously.*] I guessed it—I guessed it—the sneaking fox!

[He makes a gesture as though going to lift his gun to fire on ROBERT. BETH comes between and puts her arms round ROBERT.]

Get off him! Get off him—or I'll shoot the pair of 'e!

[AMY and BILLY disarm ELIAS.]

BETH. Father, I sent for him. I made him come to me. He's only here because I willed it. I trust him with my life—same as I trust you with my life, dear father.

ROBERT. List to me, master, and if you don't like what I say—shoot and welcome. There's your gun, and I shan't run away.

[Takes gun from BILLY and gives it to ELIAS.]

ELIAS. You damn well shan't. I'll see to that.

ROBERT. There's Molly Caunter first. And if you don't believe me, go to her father. He knows all about it now. I schemed with Molly to get Jacko off to sea, and he's going—his last chance to make good, and he's took it, and I hope a bo'sun's mate will put the fear of God into the boy. I couldn't go to Caunter himself, for he's cast Jacko out, so I went to Molly, because the gal loves her brother. We fixed it two nights ago that I should get the money and give it to her this afternoon—the cash for Jacko's outfit.

BILLY. That's what I wanted to tell 'e.

ELIAS. Then why the devil didn't you ?

BILLY. Why the devil didn't you give me a chance ? I was bursting with it, weren't I ?

ELIAS. Of all the pudding-headed lunatics in this place you're the top, William Blee. [*Puts down his gun.*] One sin less against you then !

[*To* BLANCHARD.

ROBERT. You believe that much ?

ELIAS. I do. That's done with. And now, what brings you here to-night ?

BETH. I brought him.

ROBERT. Burglary—flat burglary brought me. 'Twasn't only Beth that brought me. I'd got to come. It had to be, for she's said "yes" to me, master, she's said "yes" to me.

ELIAS. And I say "no" to you—and when I say "no" that's an end. Never, never, while I'm in the land of the living !

ROBERT. Call home when your missis said "yes" to you. Would you have brooked "no" from any mortal man ?

ELIAS. I was a Widecombe; you be a Blanchard. What holds for one don't hold for t'other.

ROBERT. Us'll leave that to the last then, for that's the kernel of the nut. We'll take the lands next, if you please.

ELIAS. What's the man babbling about now ?

BILLY. He's babbling about "Three Barrow Crofts," as you thought was yours—and they ain't. You've lost 'em.

AMY. Poor Mister Halfyard have left "Three

Barrows" to Robert under his will, Elias. For gratitude he left it, because this man was good to him and served him well.

ROBERT. The truth, master. Lawyer Pardoe will tell 'e all about it to-morrow. He's astonished too.

ELIAS. "Three Barrows" yourn? And I was going to help carry Halfyard to the pit next Monday.

ROBERT. So be I. And why not? A kindly man and never spoke naught but good of you.

ELIAS. "Three Barrows"! I've fixed with lawyer to buy the lands——

ROBERT. [*Laughing.*] How much?

ELIAS. What the hell's that to you?

ROBERT. I'm the seller.

BILLY. That's right. Don't have no lawyers. Their time be always other people's money.

ROBERT. [*Laughing.*] Shall us talk now—or to-morrow?

ELIAS. Now—I won't sleep on it. Be off, you women. We'll mighty soon fix this.

[*Exeunt BETH and AMY.*]

ROBERT. Will 'e give me a drop? I'm chucked with thirst.

[*BILLY gives ROBERT a drink from the table.*]

ROBERT pours out drink for ELIAS. *They both sit.*

ROBERT. Drinks with a deal, eh, farmer?

ELIAS. In a word I mean to have the Crofts. I've wanted 'em twenty years.

ROBERT. Willingly. You shall have them. 'Tis only a question of cash.

ELIAS. If I see more in the "Crofts" than what you do——

ROBERT. I see a pretty addition to my ewe lease.

ELIAS. More fool you. The ground's no good for grazing.

ROBERT. No good for grazing!

ELIAS. Why, 'tis all rushes and thistles and water, ain't it? More bog than pasture. And when there ban't bog, there's stones. A proper hungry wilderness and no more.

ROBERT. Then I'll have to drain it.

ELIAS. Drain? 'Twould cost a fortune to drain.

ROBERT. Not so very valuable then?

ELIAS. Far from it—a proper white elephant in my opinion. 'Twill take a terrible clever man to see any use for the place.

ROBERT. Right-o! Then I'll keep it.

ELIAS. No, you don't! I buy it this very night, Blanchard.

ROBERT. I wouldn't sell you a patch of rushes and thistles, master. I've got a great respect for you, and what you don't know about land ain't worth knowing. You be well out of this, I guess. I'm only sorry for my own disappointment. I thought I'd got a windfall.

ELIAS. Listen to me. "Three Barrows" be no good to any common farmer, and no more good to you than Snipe Bottom. 'Twould puzzle you to death. You'll never get it vitty. But, along of giving the spot a power of thought for twenty year, I

know what can be done with it. Not much—not much. Still, 'tis just worth while to me—at a rubbish price.

ROBERT. A proper generous man you are !

[BILLY *listens to this conversation with pleasure.*

'Tis like your kindness to offer me any price at all, and I wish I could give you the lands.

ELIAS. You needn't wish that. I don't take no gifts from you.

ROBERT. They say you take all you can and keep all you've got, but I see it isn't so. You mustn't be too easy though. I won't have that. A rubbish price, well—I be almost afeared of pitching it too low and vexing you.

ELIAS. Business is business. No honest, fair dealer vexes me. You're so strong for justice that no doubt, now I've told you, you'll see the lands be worth little more than a barleycorn and act according.

ROBERT. A barleycorn ! I wouldn't insult you like that, master. Land's land, and twenty acres be twenty acres !

ELIAS. And thistles be thistles, and rushes be rushes, and mud be mud. Properly shocked I was to see how the fern and heath had got in there too. 'Tis a fearful plight the fields be in. Half-yard's let 'em go to ruin !

ROBERT. You don't want 'em, and you'm too sporting to say so. I'll keep the "Crofts" then.

[*Finishing his drink and getting up.*

ELIAS. No, you shan't. I be willing to take the place off your hands. I don't want to see you handicapped in your work by the "Crofts"—a young man with his way to make.

ROBERT. Kindness alive sure enough! [*He sits again.*] And I won't be backward. You shall have 'em then at a rubbish price—a thousand pounds.

ELIAS. What did he say, Billy? A thousand crowns? That's two hundred and fifty pounds—well——

BILLY. The man said a thousand pounds.

ELIAS. A thousand pounds!

ROBERT. Would you reckon that was too much?

ELIAS. Dang-my-old-wig! I'd buy twenty acres of the best in the South Hams for that!

ROBERT. Where, master? Tell me where?

ELIAS. Talk sense if you know how.

ROBERT. What would you call sense then?

ELIAS. For a mess like "Three Barrows" I should judge three hundred a fancy price.

ROBERT. But you won't take it as a gift?

ELIAS. Three hundred ain't a gift.

ROBERT. I'd call it a gift. Let's see now. The difference between your price and mine is seven hundred pound.

ELIAS. Billy, what be "Three Barrows" worth?

BILLY. So much as it'll fetch.

ROBERT. Mind, I don't hold with your view, Mr Widecombe. Drainage ain't so very expensive. For fifty quid I'd make 'em handy meadows.

ELIAS. Fifty quid! 'Twill cost you fifty quid to get the drainage pipes up from Plymouth, let alone lay 'em. You forget what men call a day's work since the war.

ROBERT. I want to pleasure you. You say a thousand be more than you really care to pay?

ELIAS. Or intend to pay.

ROBERT. Right, then I'll come down.

ELIAS. A tidy lot I should hope.

ROBERT. Yes, I will. I'll drop a hundred.

ELIAS. I didn't know there was Jew blood in the Blanchards.

BILLY. 'Tis Scotch—not Hebrew. Andrew's grandmother comed from Glasgow.

ELIAS. Damn it, you're a miser, Blanchard.

ROBERT. 'Tis a great misfortune, but we are as we are.

ELIAS. Nine hundred's no good to me. Say five hundred, and we'll begin to talk, though that's robbery.

ROBERT. Jonathan Halfyard would never forgive me if he thought I'd took five hundred. In fact, when I think on poor Jonathan, I reckon I didn't ought to sell at all. No—I don't think I can, master. I'll keep the "Crofts."

BILLY. Halfyard would be terrible pleased, up aloft, to look down and know you was both suited.

ELIAS. You can't go back on your word. You said you'd sell the "Crofts" and I be going to have 'em.

ROBERT. Well—so be it—a thousand pounds.

ELIAS. You said nine hundred !

ROBERT. Split the difference and say nine-fifty. Now, Billy, call the ladies, I want for them to share your happiness, master.

ELIAS. You'll drive me daft, you haggler ! Don't go, Blee. We've got down to nine hundred. That's your price so far.

ROBERT. You won't pay nine-fifty then ?

ELIAS. I said five hundred.

ROBERT. I thought you was joking.

ELIAS. Six then ? Take six and be done with it.

ROBERT. What would poor Jonathan think ? He'd say I was making hay of his gift. Perhaps I will make hay of it next year. Drainage or no drainage, he had mighty good hay two years ago, and fine aftermath also.

ELIAS. Seven hundred then ! Call back the women, Billy.

ROBERT. Wait, wait, William ! Leave 'em a minute. Master says seven hundred, I say nine-fifty.

ELIAS. Nine—nine you say !

ROBERT. Very well then, nine—gone at nine.

[Shakes hands with MR WIDECOMBE.]

ELIAS. What the deuce be you good for, Billy Blee ? You stand there and see me choused out of my own ground—and don't take my side.

BILLY. Lion-monkeys don't take no sides !

ROBERT. You'm a masterpiece at a bargain, farmer! Never met such a cute chap on Darty-moor.

ELIAS. I ain't so sure—there's you. You'd skin your grandmother for twopence.

ROBERT. Nine hundred then, 'tis yours.

ELIAS. Bate fifty?

ROBERT. All right—proud to pleasure you.

[*They shake hands.*]

Eight-fifty then.

ELIAS. Call the women, Billy. [*Mops his head.*]

BILLY. They be here.

Enter AMY and BETH.

ELIAS. [*Triumphant.*] 'Tis mine, Amy. The "Crofts" be mine. Eight hundred pounds!

ROBERT. What—what, farmer?

ELIAS. Eight hundred—wasn't that right?

ROBERT. [*Laughs.*] Oh yes—yes. That's it—eight hundred—to you.

BILLY. What do the "Crofts" matter anyhow? Us old birds have got to hop the twig presently, and then these young creatures come together willy-nilly, and a ring fence runs round "Twelve Trees" and the "Coombe." Say "God bless 'em," and let everybody go to bed.

[*BETH has assumed too much and gone to*

ROBERT.

BETH. [*To ROBERT.*] Be our true love running smooth, Bob?

ROBERT. That don't depend on us.

[Takes her in his arms.]

AMY. Billy's right, Elias. I'll trust Beth to him, and if I can——

ELIAS. Stand apart, you two! As a man, Blanchard, I'll go so far as to say you may yet justify yourself. You're a damned sight too fond of money, but that's your affair. And Beth's my affair. Perhaps if you was any man on earth but a Blanchard—then, in time, I might—I might come to it. But not for you—never for you. 'Tis against nature that any woman of my race should wed along of any man of yours. I'm calm as a stone, you see, but I'm fixed as a stone. I'll answer reason with reason if you will. I ban't angry no more, I ban't fretty, nor cranky now. I'm sorry for my tantrums, and I ax all of you to forgive 'em. Anger don't help a case. But I'm fixed—so fixed as the stars in the sky. I've sworn afore God, and I break no oaths.

ROBERT. Then we're up against it, Beth.

[Laughs.]

ELIAS. You're up against duty; and I hope you'll do yourn so surely as Beth will do hers.

ROBERT. To think it comes to this then! Little did Andrew Blanchard dream of such a thing, master.

ELIAS. He'd have forbid you to wed a Widecombe with his dying breath—that's sure.

ROBERT. He knew a bit more about me than

what you do. And if he'd known all, he'd have been first to bid me tell our secrets.

ELIAS. I don't want Blanchard secrets.

ROBERT. There's a way out, Mrs Widecombe.

BETH. There shall be—we'll make a way out, Robert.

ROBERT. Steady, my dear heart! A way out, so simple as walking through this door.

ELIAS. Don't fool yourself. I've sworn.

ROBERT. You've sworn your girl shan't marry a Blanchard, farmer, but how if I'm not a Blanchard?

BILLY. Hold on, young man, or you'll have dead men out of their graves!

ROBERT. I'll say nothing the master can't prove himself. My Uncle Andrew—so to call him—never married.

ELIAS. We know that.

ROBERT. For why? Because he loved once and only once. The woman he loved was torn in half 'twixt him and you, Mr. Widecombe, and couldn't take both, so she ended by taking neither. She married Robert Bulstrode, of York, and he died afore his baby was born. And at York his wife died also when her child was two year old. Andrew Blanchard never lost sight of her, and journeyed up there to see her afore she went home. He lifted a very fine stone to her, Mr Blanchard did, though none knew he'd done it. The child must have gone to the Workhouse, but he took me. The only memory of my mother ever I had was a few trinkets

that foster Uncle Andrew put by for me. The little locket I gave you, missis——

BETH. I made her wear it, father. Just the letter “A” and “Always faithful.”

[AMY gives locket to ELIAS, who stares at it.

ROBERT. 'Twas given out I was Blanchard's nephew, you see, and I took the name.

ELIAS. That was your mother's locket—my gift to her!

ROBERT. Your gift, master!

ELIAS. Annabel Brendon's boy?

ROBERT. Yes—sure.

ELIAS. Not a Blanchard?

ROBERT. Only for the honoured name of the man.

ELIAS. And why did you go to him? Why didn't you come to me—straight to me?

ROBERT. You don't run after people at two year old. They run after you.

ELIAS. I'd got so much right to bring up Annabel's boy as him—more—more than him. She'd far sooner I'd had the handling of you. 'Tis shameful he should have gone behind my back and took you.

ROBERT. For love of my mother.

ELIAS. Not a bit of it—to score off me. Wouldn't I have done all he did and done it a damned sight better? Wouldn't I have turned you into a Wide-combe if I'd had the chance? Think o' that!

ROBERT. What I've missed!

ELIAS. Dang-my-old-wig! You might have been Beth's brother!

ROBERT. Good Lord, master, don't tell such dreadful things!

ELIAS. And now you've been fetched up a Blanchard—and spoiled.

ROBERT. I'm a larner still. Beth'll save me.

ELIAS. [*To AMY.*] Come here, mother. [*To BETH.*] Come here, Beth. 'Tis all over—'tis all changed. We fret and we plot and we spin, and time and chance blow all away—our love and our hate both. The end of it be in Higher Hands than ours.

BILLY. 'Tis peace with honour then; and I'm darned near hungry again.

[*AMY takes ROBERT's hand.*
Jine up! Jine up! The folk sang "Good morn, and good day," and us'll sing "Good-night." Come, missis.

AMY. There's songs of gladness in my heart. I'm sure, William.

BETH. Oh, Bob!

ELIAS. Hitch on to me, you women.

[*They take hands, BILLY, AMY, ELIAS, BETH, and ROBERT—GREGORY and JENNY return and aid the song.*

ALL. Dear bride and groom we wish you joy,
Good-night, good neighbours all,
A cloudless life without alloy,
And first a girl and then a boy,
Good-night, good neighbours all.

WOMEN. [*Sing.*] Good-night!

MEN. [*Sing.*] Good-night!

WOMEN. [*Sing.*] Good-night !

MEN. [*Sing.*] Good-night !

ALL. [*Sing.*] Good-night, good neighbours all,
Good-night, good neighbours all !

CURTAIN

